Ragpicking through time: waste, gender, and modernity in China from the early twentieth century to today

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Sheffield
School of East Asian Studies

July 2025

Abstract

In the face of mounting environmental and social challenges posed by the rapid rise in global municipal solid waste, waste has become an important focus of study in the humanities and social sciences. Scholars specializing in China have contributed to this growing field by exploring how the material, cultural, and social dimensions of waste reveal deeper societal issues in a country that has long served as the world's dumping ground. This thesis seeks to engage with existing scholarship by presenting perspectives that have been overlooked or insufficiently explored. It begins by situating waste and its broader implications within the historical trajectory of China's modernization, spanning from the early twentieth century to the present. It then examines how the relationship between waste and modernity is formed through gender, bringing to light voices, identities, and stories that have long been marginalized.

Combining textual analysis with ethnographic research to bring together the everyday narratives and practices of waste over time, this thesis argues that the ambiguity and liminality of waste, both in its materiality and its cultural meanings, make it a site where the fractures of modernity unfold. Using gender as an analytical lens, I show that waste sites are places where gendered oppression and other forms of marginalization are simultaneously reinforced and challenged. Moreover, by exploring how waste evokes the diverse identities, sensory experiences, and forms of mobility that contest established social classifications, my thesis proposes a non-anthropocentric way of imagining and living with waste, aiming to foster more interconnected and inclusive futures—futures that recognize and make space for both human and non-human beings often marginalized in the process of modernization.

Acknowledgements

Over the four years of my PhD, I often imagined this moment—finally reaching the point where I could write the acknowledgements. I had thought of many fancy words and phrases to thank my supervisors, Dr. Jamie Coates and Professor Kate Taylor-Jones. But now that the moment has come, all I truly want to say is a simple but heartfelt: thank you. All those fancy words seem insignificant compared to the constant, invaluable assistance, support, encouragement, and guidance that Jamie and Kate have offered me throughout this journey. Without them, this thesis would not exist. I feel deeply fortunate to have had them as my supervisors, and what I have learned from them will stay with me long beyond these pages.

I would also like to thank WRoCAH for funding this project. Their support has been invaluable—not only financially, but also in giving me opportunities to grow both academically and professionally. I especially want to thank Roberta, Milena, and Starlina—their company and friendship made every WRoCAH event more enjoyable and rewarding.

I am truly grateful to all those who offered me selfless help during my fieldwork. To the waste workers who, despite their busy schedules, patiently and kindly answered even my most stupid questions; to the urban and rural residents who trusted me enough to speak openly and honestly; and to Liwen Chen, Junsheng Fu, and Jiuliang Wang, whose generosity turned this experience into more than just academic research—it became a journey of exploring the meaning of life. It is these people who have kept me motivated and confident throughout. They are the ones who bring this thesis to life.

Thank you to all my PhD colleagues—especially Pinyuan, Yingzi, Mia, and Zhangbo—whose friendship and care supported me through my most difficult times. Thank you to Xi (Wenyi) for being such a supportive and dedicated friend, and for all the valuable advice she has shared about my research and career. My deepest gratitude also goes to all the wonderful faculty and staff at SEAS—especially Professor Jennifer Coates, for sharing so many helpful insights during our coffee chats; Dr. Mark Pendleton, for his generous support with my research employment project; Dr. Mike Prentice, for all his guidance with my teaching; and Ms. Megan Morris, for helping me navigate all kinds of administrative tasks. I have said it many times, but choosing to do my PhD at SEAS has been one of the best decisions of my life.

To my family and friends: Thank you to my parents, for their unconditional, endless love and trust, and for always making me feel like the luckiest daughter in the world. To Yeye and Nainai, who, even though they do not quite understand what I have been working on, never fail to say how proud they are of me. To Waigong and Waipo, thank you for all the wonderful memories. Although they will never get to see it themselves, I want them to know that I have woven their bedtime stories into words (even in English!), and I will carry those stories forward for as long as I can. To my best friends, Laoshang and Laocao, for bringing laughter into my life every day.

Finally, I want to thank my husband Yi for his love and support over the past eleven years, always being there with a hug or a shoulder to lean on whenever I needed him. So, I dedicate this thesis to our twenties that have just passed, to all the time we have spent together, and to all the places we have been.

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Chinese words are romanized using pinyin, except for some well-known names like Confucius and Mencius, which are more commonly referred to using their established English or Wade-Giles forms. The thesis uses both simplified and traditional Chinese characters, in accordance with how they appear in the original sources.

Romanized Chinese names follow the traditional name order, with the family name appearing before the given name, except in cases where the individual is more commonly known by the alternative.

All Chinese texts quoted in this thesis are my own translations, unless otherwise specified.

Note on anonymity

All participant names in this thesis are pseudonyms, except for those who consented to the use of their real names.

All residential compound and village names used in this thesis are pseudonyms.

Introduction

Background and Research Questions

We are facing a global waste crisis—this is the message one gets from a quick online search for 'global waste' or 'environmental problems.' With global municipal solid waste expected to increase by 70% —from 2.1 billion tons in 2023 to 3.8 billion tons by 2050 — and the annual cost of waste management, including the hidden costs of pollution, poor health, and climate change, projected to reach $640.3 billion (UNEP, 2024), it is becoming impossible for not only international organizations and governments, but also ordinary people, to ignore the impact of waste on our planet and everyday lives. The waste crisis is not merely an environmental issue; it is closely intertwined with social problems. For example, the global waste trade deepens inequality between countries, while excessive waste disproportionately affects poor and marginalized communities, who face greater risks and have less access to social, economic, and healthcare resources. In response to these issues, scholars in the humanities and social sciences have taken different approaches to explore how the challenges of waste should not be addressed solely through science and technology but also by reshaping narratives through media, storytelling, and creative expression. As Jennifer Wenzel (2019) points out, environmental problems are not merely technological, economic, or political—they are also 'narrative problems and problems of the imagination' (p. 1). Literature, film, art, personal stories, oral histories, and other forms of creative and everyday expression not only reflect how we have dealt with waste in the past and how our relationship with it has changed over time, but also can 'foster more robust accounts of the past, present, and future of global inequality, in order to energize movements for justice and livable futures' (Wenzel, 2019, p. 3). This thesis takes on this perspective, combining textual analysis and ethnographic research to explore how cultural representations and everyday

narratives about waste bring to light stories of marginalization and inequality in China, a country that has long been the world's dumping ground. Using 'ragpicking'—a method inspired primarily by Walter Benjamin—to collect these stories, this thesis argues that the ambiguity and liminality of waste— both in its materiality and its cultural meanings—make it a site where the fractures of modernity unfold. It suggests that to tackle the environmental and social challenges of waste, we must first rethink our relationship with it through perspectives beyond the traditional narrative of linear modernization. Core aspects that underpin conventional narratives of modernization pivot around how gender and non-human life are treated in wider systems of signification and action. During my fieldwork, these aspects emerged consistently—not only as recurring themes in the literary, visual, and artistic texts I encountered, but also as prominent topics in everyday conversations and as patterns shaping people's daily practices related to waste. Moreover, gender stands out as a core theme across temporal contexts—not only in the present, but also in historical materials and in future-oriented narratives. Therefore, based on my textual and ethnographic research, this thesis advances these discussions by demonstrating that gender offers a powerful conceptual lens for uncovering intersectional oppression and multiple forms of marginalization tied to waste—including those involving the nonhuman—throughout the long arc of China's modernization.

While waste has received growing attention in Chinese Studies, current scholarship has largely concentrated on specific aspects of it. A key focus has been on anthropological and sociological studies of informal urban migrant waste pickers, examining how their conditions reflect wider issues of social and global inequality, as documented by Inverardi-Ferri (2018), Wu and Zhang (2019), and Wang, Gu, and Tao (2022). Another approach is to examine waste-related literature, film, art, and other forms of creative expression to explore how the cultural meanings of waste shift and how these representations expose environmental

and social injustices, as seen in the research of Rojas (2019), Hillenbrand (2019), and Wang (2019). A third perspective, as illustrated by the studies of Landsberger (2019) and Goldstein (2021), traces the history of recycling, focusing on changes in waste and recycling policies, as well as in the lives of individual recyclers. Beyond these three major perspectives, an extensive body of scholarship focuses on policy analysis and quantitative studies of waste management in contemporary China, with Guo et al. (2021) and Fan et al. (2023) among many examples. While these studies play a crucial role in influencing policy and implementation, they differ from my thesis in both methodology and discipline, as my work is rooted in the humanities and qualitative approaches. Because of this, my thesis primarily seeks to engage with scholarly voices from the three perspectives discussed above: investigating the power structures and social relationships involved in waste management using anthropological and qualitative sociological approaches; analyzing cultural representations of waste; and exploring the historical development of waste-related narratives and behaviors.

While inspired by previous scholarship, my thesis aims to explore aspects that they have overlooked or not sufficiently examined. First, while scholars have largely focused on informal urban waste pickers, they have neglected other groups involved in waste work, such as those employed in the public and private sectors, despite their large numbers and vital role in China's waste management system. Liebman and Lee (2020) reveal the complex network of individuals involved in sorting post-consumer waste in Chinese cities like Shanghai and Kunming, showing that waste work is 'a site of heightened contestation with multiple types of value in play' (p. 63). While my research shares a focus with Liebman and Lee, I go further by exploring how personal histories, stories, and everyday sensory experiences shape the fluid and ever-shifting conflicts over value at waste sites. In particular, I unpack how gender—not as fixed identities but as the ways people create, perceive, and enact categories

in everyday life—complicates the meanings and value associated with waste. As my fieldwork consistently demonstrated, waste sites, like sorting and transfer stations, are more than infrastructures contingent on urban governance and market conditions, as Liebman and Lee (2020) suggest, but spaces imbued with gendered emotions, memories, struggles, and hopes. This connects to the second gap my thesis intends to address: the individual and collective emotions evoked by waste, which shape our relationship with it today, reverberate through the past, and will ripple into the future. Although current scholarship has shown how representations of waste expose 'the dark side of modernity'—a term borrowed from Jeffrey C. Alexander (2013) —it overlooks how these representations contain thematic and narrative patterns that resonate with those in history. For example, without an understanding of the patrilineal narratives about waste, hygiene, and modernity in the twentieth century, one might easily overlook both the underlying gender bias and the feminist critiques embedded in contemporary literature, film, art, and other forms of representation. Similarly, without recognizing how gender shaped waste practices in the past, it would be hard to see how, despite advancements in waste treatment and management technology, women's social position —reflected in their ongoing association with waste— has not changed much in comparison. Third, in addition to merely focusing on the contemporary period, most studies on waste tend to concentrate on urban areas or the urban-rural junctions, where informal waste pickers typically live and where landfills are often situated. However, the countryside, including rural areas such as islands sustained by agriculture and fishing, is an important site for exploring the connection between waste and everyday lives. It faces waste problems similar to, if not more severe than, those in cities, and showcases different forms of waste management. Moreover, for many people working with waste in urban areas, the countryside—whether viewed as 'backward' or as 'frontier for waste sorting,' represents home and a destination, connecting them to their past while offering a vision for the future.

By incorporating the countryside into my study of waste, I aim to show a wider range of narratives and lived experiences—those of humans and non-human actors who have been marginalized—and to show how they shape multiple forms of modernity.

To address the gaps mentioned above, this thesis explores the following research questions:

1. How has waste been represented, imagined, managed, and experienced in modern and contemporary China?
2. What do these everyday representations and practices of waste reveal about overlooked aspects of China's modernization?
3. By shedding light on these overlooked aspects, how can waste help us find ways of life that better tackle today's environmental and social challenges?

Before delving into these questions, this introductory chapter will first provide a literature review on how discussions of waste have been historically connected to discourses of modernity. It then moves on to explore how gender, as a theoretical framework, offers valuable insights into the complex relationship between waste and modernity, especially in revealing various forms of exclusion and intersectional oppression. Next, the chapter presents the methodology, discussing why and how the 'ragpicking' approach, which weaves together textual analysis and ethnography, is the best approach to answering my research questions. Finally, it concludes with an overview of the thesis structure.

Literature Review

Defining waste

What is waste? The meaning of it changes depending on the context, making it difficult to define. In everyday language, it can refer to anything unwanted or thrown away. Based on the situation, it can be used interchangeably with words like trash, garbage, refuse,

scrap, debris, or dirt (Tompkins, 2019). Related to this, 'waste' is often used metaphorically to describe people, things, or activities that are seen as worthless or marginalized by society—what Mary Douglas (1966) calls 'matter out of place.' In the Chinese context, '*laji*' (垃圾)—the most common equivalent of the English word 'waste'—has a similar range of meanings, referring to both human and non-human entities that are considered no longer useful or unfit by evolving mainstream value systems throughout history. Despite its miscellaneous definitions, the everyday use of 'waste' blurs the line between the material and the symbolic.

Theories of waste in the humanities and social sciences also examine how its material aspects interact with the symbolic implications it holds in human relationships, societies, and history. One view is that waste shapes people's sense of self and identity. Gay Hawkins (2006), for example, explores how waste habits are tied to ecological ethics —the virtue of making environmentally responsible choices and the guilt of not doing so. For her, these ethics of waste '[constitute] the self in [...] embodied practices through which we decide what is connected to us and what isn't' (Hawkins, 2006, p. 4). Similarly, Stephanie Foote and Elizabeth Mazzolini (2012) argue that because waste is so ubiquitous, it is 'among the most immediate categories against which people are defined, and against which their identities as raced, gendered, and classed subjects are conceptualized' (p. 3). By examining how blogs and online discussions about waste reduction cultivate 'an environmental subjectivity' that drives real-life changes toward more sustainable living, Foote (2012) highlights that waste is central to the negotiation between individual agency and engagement in larger political and social structures (p. 76). While differing from yet complementing the focus on everyday experiences and practices, another line of scholarly thought emphasizes how waste reveals the interconnectedness of various systems—global and local, economic and political, historical and contemporary. William Rathje and Cullen Murphy (2001), documenting the

University of Arizona's Garbage Project, show how the waste left behind by civilizations, cultures, and communities provides insight into their histories. They write, 'Human beings have over the centuries left many accounts describing their lives and civilizations [...] Historians are understandably drawn to written evidence of this kind, but garbage has often served as a kind of tattle-tale, setting the record straight' (p. 11-12). Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi (2011) investigates the link between waste generation and consumption, criticizing a capitalist system in which the global flow of waste—an unavoidable consequence of global trade—worsens the unequal social and spatial distribution of environmental problems. Although these studies take different approaches, they converge on the idea that waste is not merely worthless or unwanted, as it is often perceived in daily life. Instead, they recognize waste as a category of value—not only because it can be recycled, repurposed, or reused, but also because it preserves history and culture as an archaeological record and has the potential to bring about change, both positive and negative, in individuals and societies.

This idea that waste is socially constructed— that something is only considered waste because society labels it as such— serves as a crucial starting point for exploring waste's symbolic meaning. Among others, Michael Thompson's *Rubbish theory: the creation and destruction of value* remains a key text in explicating how the production of waste reflects the wider processes of value creation and transformation. According to Thompson, rubbish represents an intermediate stage in which objects of 'transient' value—those with declining value and finite lifespans—can occasionally be transformed into goods of 'durable' value, which have increasing value and infinite lifespans (Thompson and Reno, 2017, p. 10). One example he gives is the history of Stevengraphs (Victorian woven silk pictures). When first sold in 1879, a Stevengraph cost one shilling, and between 1879 and 1940, tens or even hundreds of millions were produced and sold. By 1950, however, they had lost all market value. Yet by 1971, they reemerged as valuable collectibles, selling for as much as £75 each

at auction (Thompson and Reno, 2017, p. 31). This trajectory, when viewed purely in economic terms, aligns with Thompson's theory of transformation across the three cultural categories (objects of 'transient' value, rubbish, and goods of 'durable' value). More importantly, as Thompson points out, it raises critical questions about who has the power to influence this transfer in value and what kinds of people engage with transient objects, durable objects, or rubbish (Thompson and Reno, 2017, p. 11).

Such reflection on the shifting nature of waste and value is echoed in Eiko Maruko Siniawer's (2018) study on postwar Japan, where she argues that a fundamental quality of waste lies in its 'remarkable capacity to reveal what is valuable and meaningful' (p. 3). Along with the visible and tangible incarnations of waste, like everyday garbage, Siniawer points out that the question of value extends to many other aspects of postwar Japanese life, including resources, money, space, and time. What is considered wasteful in terms of actions, expenditure, and use is subjective and not fixed; it simply reveals the social and cultural concerns of a specific historical moment (Siniawer, 2018, p. 5). John Scanlan (2005) broadens the discussion of waste to include not only material objects and ruins but also hidden, forgotten, discarded, and residual phenomena, as well as what he calls 'broken knowledge'— 'the bits that no longer fit or that get in the way of a truth that always lies just ahead' (p. 16). He explains that this 'truth' represents progress and certainty that Western societies sought to achieve through 'a cleansing or refining impulse'—the habit of separating the valuable from the worthless and 'a will to order' (Scanlan, 2005, p. 58). By analyzing how scientists and philosophers have continuously discarded knowledge deemed outdated, incorrect, or useless, Scanlan (2005) describes the history of Western culture as 'a history of disposal, of garbaging' (p. 9). He argues that this constant process of disposal has not only generated more material waste but also produced useless knowledge that led to the many problems of Western societies.

Along with critiques of the waste-value dichotomy, scholars in literature and the arts examine the aesthetics of waste. For example, Susan Morrison (2015) analyzes the portrayal of excrement, feces, dirt, filth, and ruin in Western canonical literature, from Chaucer's poetry to T. S. Eliot's verse, arguing that 'the sacred sublimity inherently possible in trash' has been present since the Middle Ages (p. 4). Likewise, in her study of postmodern art, Patricia Yaeger (2008) argues that the obsession with trash in art has replaced the traditional divide between nature and culture, partly because the nature we are born into is 'never culture's opposite,' as it is 'made by a wind machine—or compacted with refuse, ozone, and mercury' (p. 323). She writes, 'If waste or rubbish dominates postmodern art, it is not because an artistic preoccupation with detritus is new [...] But postmodern detritus has unexpectedly taken on the sublimity that was once associated with nature' (p. 327). In a similar vein, Christopher Schmidt (2014) contends that waste is central to modern aesthetics, as poetry's marginal status makes it 'predisposed to take up waste as a subject' and explore 'the cognitive dissonances of twenty-first-century life, in which American consumers are compelled to spend and conserve in order to [...] avoid economic and ecological collapse' (p. 3). By framing waste as something that can evoke sublimity or even beauty, these studies further highlight that the associations of waste with disgust, the abject, fear, and other negative meanings are socially constructed.

My thesis builds on existing scholarship to view waste as a reflection of broader social and historical changes that give rise to varying values and ways of relating to the world. While my focus is on everyday municipal solid waste and how it inspires representations and ideas in both daily life and cultural expressions like literature and art, I recognize that waste comes in many forms and can shift between them, both materially and symbolically. For example, as my thesis will show, efforts to remove municipal solid waste in China have historically been closely intertwined with the elimination of other forms of

waste, such as excrement and bacteria, reinforcing a narrative that frames waste as a barrier to the nation's modernization. In another case, municipal solid waste, construction debris, recyclables, and residents' old belongings come together to characterize an urban neighborhood as it undergoes demolition, marking it as a ruin of contemporary life. As Hawkins (2006) aptly puts it, 'Waste, then, isn't a fixed category of things; it is an effect of classification and relations' (p. 2). Based on this, my thesis explores how key classifications and relations —such as gender, urban vs. rural, and national vs. individual—have shaped everyday modern life in China.

Waste and modernity

Scholars in the humanities and social sciences have often studied waste through the lens of modernity. Among them, Zygmunt Bauman is a key figure. In his book *Wasted lives: modernity and its outcasts*, Bauman (2004) explains how the production of waste —and 'wasted humans,' when the excess, redundancy, and worthlessness of material waste are applied to people— is 'an inevitable outcome of modernization, and an inseparable accompaniment of modernity' (p. 5). According to him, technological and economic progress, the pursuit of order, and the unregulated, forceful processes of globalization —all characteristics of modernity— have led to the crisis of both waste and the 'wasted humans' (those who are either unrecognized or unwanted and excluded from society). Bauman (2004) explains that for a large part of modern history, the modern world—that is, imperial Euro-America—solved their 'locally produced' problems with 'global solutions' by exporting waste and surplus population, both byproducts of industrialization and capitalist consumer societies, to the 'backward' and 'underdeveloped' parts of the world (p. 5-6). However, as Western modernization expanded worldwide, all localities were forced to bear 'the

consequences of modernity's global triumph' as the planet rapidly runs out of dumping grounds and waste recycling resources (Bauman, 2004, p. 6).

Bauman's theory reveals the paradoxical role of waste in relation to modernity. On one hand, modernity inevitably produces various forms of waste—in fact, waste is an essential part of modernity itself. Bauman (2004) defines modernity as 'a condition of compulsive, and addictive, designing' (p. 30). Modernity is fundamentally about order —for example, modern nation-states claim monopoly on designing and building social order. But order cannot exist without waste—or the chaos it represents. To establish order, chaos must first be defined and removed, which is why the history of modernization is marked by practices of exclusion, disposal, and obliteration. However, even though waste is the counterpart, or what Bauman (2004) calls the 'alter ego' of modernity (p. 31), it is unrecognized in most mainstream discussions of modernity. For instance, in Victorian England, dust-yards—where household waste was collected, sorted, and processed, mostly by women, children, and older men—are often seen as facilitating the transition to a municipally-run waste management system, which later served as a model for urban modernization efforts around the world (Velis, Wilson and Cheeseman, 2009). However, little was documented about life in those dust-yards, the working conditions of laborers, or their environmental and social impacts. As they were replaced by more 'modern' facilities and new social orders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the dust-yards became something that modernity needed to discard.

Like waste, modernity has multiple definitions, and what waste can reveal about it depends on how we understand modernity. For Bauman (2012), modernity is an evolving condition under which human societies operate. What he calls 'liquid modernity' encapsulates the traits of today's highly globalized, consumer-driven societies, where the boundaries between different categories are fluid and uncertain (Bauman, 2012). Instead of

seeing modernity as a finished historical period replaced by postmodernity, Bauman (2012) views contemporary condition as a continuation of modernity—only in a more 'liquid' form, driven by the ever-increasing mobility of relationships and identities.[1] As such, modernity's problems of waste and disposal persist and have only worsened—rather than improved—amid the deepening effects of globalized capitalism. These include the weakening of the relationship between labor and capital, the erosion of social and communal bonds, and the expansion of the 'security industry,' which have led to major issues like refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants— who Bauman (2004) calls 'the waste of globalization' (p. 58).

Walter Benjamin's critique of modernity adds another layer to the interpretation of waste. For him, modernity is a phantasmagoria, a term he uses to describe the illusionary, dreamlike experience of the Arcades in Paris (Benjamin, 2002). He writes:

> World exhibitions glorify the exchange value of the commodity. They create a framework in which its use value recedes into the background. They open a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted. The entertainment industry makes this easier by elevating the person to the level of the commodity. He surrenders to its manipulations while enjoying his alienation from himself and others (Benjamin, 2002, p. 7).

Here, Benjamin attributes the phenomenon of phantasmagoria to commodity fetishism, a defining feature of the capitalist modern world. This fetishization warped the perception of value, making newness and novelty the 'highest value,' while overlooking the commodity's use value, along with the labor and social relationships behind its production (Benjamin, 2002, p. 11). The obsession with 'the new' not only accelerated and normalized the disposal of the old but also alienated human relationships by commodifying people and classifying them by their connection to novelty—as seen in fashion. Moreover, it reinforced a phantasmagoric view of modernity as 'a chain of events that leads with unbroken, historical

[1] Scholars like Jean-François Lyotard (1984), Jean Baudrillard (1994), and others have suggested that modernity came to an end in the mid- or late twentieth century.

continuity to the realization of social utopia, a "heaven" of class harmony and material abundance' (Buck-Morss, 1989, p. 95). Benjamin challenges this view by focusing on the small, overlooked aspects of history— the 'abortive, retrograde, and obsolescent' —which were dismissed in contrast to the 'productive,' 'forward-looking,' 'lively,' 'positive' qualities celebrated in modernity (Benjamin, 2002, p. 459). In the early twentieth century, when Benjamin wrote about the arcades, these once-glorious hubs of nineteenth-century consumer dream worlds had deteriorated into 'graveyards, containing the refuse of a discarded past' (Buck-Morss, 1989, p. 38). The goal of Benjamin in writing about them, as Buck-Morss (1989) puts it, was 'to interpret for his own generation these dream fetishes in which, in fossilized form, history's traces had survived' (p. 39). Waste, in this sense, retains remnants of the past.

Both Benjamin's and Bauman's theories unveil modernity through its waste—the people, events, and objects that are excluded or deemed unfit for the modern world. However, because the meanings of waste—as well as the narratives and practices surrounding it—are constructed by specific cultural, social, and historical contexts, its relationship with modernity cannot be seen as universal. Benjamin and Bauman both, even if implicitly, saw modernity as a European creation that would inevitably extend to all modernizing and modern societies. However, as Eisenstadt (2002) argues, 'modernity and Westernization are not identical,' and 'the history of modernity [...] is a story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs' (p. 2). While acknowledging that modernity's cultural and political framework first emerged and developed in Western and Central Europe, Eisenstadt's (2002) concept of 'multiple modernities' highlights how societies outside Europe continuously select, reinterpret, and reformulate European modernity (p. 15). As he explains, 'The cultural and institutional programs that unfolded in these societies were characterized particularly by a tension between conceptions of

themselves as part of the modern world and ambivalent attitudes toward modernity in general and toward the West in particular' (Eisenstadt, 2002, p. 15). What the West defines as waste may not be viewed the same way in other parts of the world, as each society has its own history and ways of producing, categorizing, managing, and representing waste. For example, Sarah Moore's (2009) study on garbage strikes in Oaxaca, Mexico illustrates the tension between modernity's expectation of cleanliness and its growing cycles of production and consumption, which generate more waste. This tension, she argues, gives rise to 'an urban modernity wherein a new politics of garbage can emerge'— a politics in which strikers assert their right to the city (p. 427). Elizabeth Allison (2016), on the other hand, explores through ethnography how the common Western waste management mantra of the 'Three Rs'—'reduce, reuse, recycle'—does not fit the Bhutanese context, which reveals the diverse and often conflicting perspectives on waste in Bhutan.

As I will elaborate throughout my thesis, my exploration of waste is grounded in China's modernization history, focusing on how ordinary Chinese people have navigated daily life under state-led modernization efforts. In particular, I examine through waste how state-defined modernity, though often perceived as monolithic, has manifested in different ways across historical periods, media, and local contexts. My focus on everyday life is informed by Goldstein (2006), who, drawing from Henri Lefebvre's work, explains the relationship between modernity and the everyday: 'Modernity is staged in the space of the everyday, in its myriad particular contexts, and modernity in many ways reproduces and reshapes the way the everyday is lived' (p. 6). Waste, as a typical byproduct of mundane life, opens a materializing space and serves as a conceptual category that enable a more critical study of modernity.

Waste and gender

While scholars have studied waste through the lens of gender, their focus has largely been on policy development and implementation. For instance, Scheinberg, Muller, and Tasheva (1999) suggest that community-based waste management is a gendered activity that can be improved by considering women's interests. They further argue that waste management is inherently a power-driven social activity, where access to and control over resources are uneven. As a result, it is necessary to adopt a gender perspective to 'help us put together better projects and to evaluate ongoing activities more fairly' (Scheinberg, Muller and Tasheva 1999, p.3). Samson and Hurt (2003), Poswa (2004), and Buckingham *et al*. (2005), although using different methods, all show that gendered divisions of labor at work and at home, along with household demographics and other inequalities, result in female waste workers facing greater hardships than their male counterparts. While the issue of gender is raised with good intentions in these studies, it is sometimes reduced to a buzzword that only concerns certain groups of women, without bringing any real change to existing gender knowledge and relations. For one thing, although the studies have introduced a feminist perspective in waste studies, their analyses are mostly driven by an economic model that focuses on creating a more efficient waste management system, rather than addressing the actual living and working conditions of female workers. In addition, by focusing on waste management in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, much of this scholarship tends to attribute the oppression of female waste workers solely to local socio-economic issues in the Global South. This economic-political framework, as Catherine Eschle (2004) points out, ignores 'the challenge posed [...] by a more sociological, multidimensional approach which has some space for gender analysis' (p.99), and should be complemented by more cultural inquiry that goes beyond just the practical.

One part of this inquiry is to examine how gender norms and dynamics influence the way waste and its meanings are socially constructed. Waste is gendered not only because

gender biases are embedded in the waste stream, but also because our relationships with waste are strongly shaped by our gender identities. Feminist theorists such as Barbara Risman (2004), Ruth Gavison (2017), and W. J. Scarborough (2017) describe gender as a social structure that shapes individuals, institutions, and everyday interactions. In particular, they argue that the public/private divide is a major source of inequality and injustice, creating and reinforcing hierarchies that result in unequal access to power and resources. Since women have historically been linked to the private sphere, where domestic waste is produced and handled, they are often perceived as being more closely associated with waste. Heike Weber's (2013) study on waste salvage in wartime Germany shows that domestic waste was traditionally seen as a female responsibility —a role further reinforced during the war, as waste collection and sorting became 'a pervasive element of [women's] everyday lives, as well as those of schoolchildren' (p. 371). Similarly, Susan Strasser (2000) notes that women have come to decide what counts as waste, as they have been tasked with maintaining cleanliness and order in the home. The public/private divide also intersects with other gendered binaries, such as the long-standing presumption that 'man is to culture and women is to nature,' which feminist scholars have long sought to challenge (Ortner, 1972; Warren, 1997; Leach, 2007). This presumption led to the comparison of gender relations with the transition from rubbish to durable goods, as illustrated in Thompson's earlier-mentioned paradigm. According to Thompson, durability is linked to culture, and therefore to men. Since women are typically excluded from durability, items controlled by women can only become durable when ownership is passed to men (Thompson and Reno, 2017, p. 48). Even so, women themselves remain treated as 'rubbish,' with their value ignored and unrecognized. What constitutes waste is deeply tied to gendered norms and power structures and should therefore be examined in relation to broader experiences of gender inequalities.

My thesis explores how the relationship between waste and gender pervades our culture and everyday life, yet often goes unnoticed or is taken for granted, and how it becomes embedded and normalized in the production of knowledge. As Sara Ahmed (2010) points out, knowing—and the production and dissemination of knowledge—are inherently political acts deeply intertwined with power and resistance. Waste studies and gender research share a key common ground in their critique of so-called 'mainstream knowledge'—whether by challenging center–margin hierarchies in epistemology or by introducing alternative frameworks like situated knowledge and affect. Since Douglas, the study of waste has involved examining the systems and power structures that underpin the classification of waste. Her concept of dirt as 'a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order' (Douglas, 1966, p. 44) highlights society's strong urge to separate, purify, and define boundaries, punishing transgressions to maintain its 'designs of hierarchy or symmetry' (Douglas, 1966, p. 4). As discussed above, more recent research, such as Bauman's, has emphasized the need to focus on those forced to handle waste for the privileged, and how society's attitudes toward waste are projected onto their bodies.

The idea of waste as an epistemic intervention echoes the narratives developed by generations of gender scholars and activists to challenge a history of marginalization and exclusion. Gender should not be used to label or categorize certain identities, but rather to investigate how overlapping systems of oppression operate and interact. This view has been well-established in contemporary feminist scholarship, particularly in work on intersectionality and feminist new materialism. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1998), for instance, contends that feminist scholarship is constrained when it depends on frameworks that reduce discrimination to a single dimension of identity. Donna Haraway (1988), on a different note, challenges the human-centered ideal of objectivity and the universal application of scientific methods, instead calling for knowledge that is grounded in location, perspective, and

context—where, as she puts it, 'partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard' (p. 589). Similarly, Sandra Harding (1992) builds on standpoint theory, arguing that 'all knowledge attempts are socially situated, and some of these [...] social locations are better [...] to produce knowledge that can be for marginalized people' (p. 444). This emphasis on situatedness and vision from below is reflected in much of the waste literature, where scholars challenge the notion that waste can be addressed solely through top-down scientific and technological solutions. However, knowledge of waste from 'the margins' is not free from outside assumptions or interests, nor should it be viewed as rigid or homogeneous. As Tompkins' (2019) study shows, the diverse identities of housewives, who have been central to waste management in Japan, play a significant role in shaping women's sense of national belonging and their practices of citizenship. Nguyen (2016), on the other hand, explores how waste traders in Hanoi, Vietnam contribute to the regeneration and revaluation of urban space through their 'gendered performative and place-making practices' (p. 116). My thesis follows these lines of inquiry to explore the diverse gendered experiences and standpoints involved in my research on waste. As will be illustrated through the examples and stories in this thesis, gendered inequalities and oppression related to waste are not limited to women but also affect other marginalized groups, including children, seniors, gender minorities, the nonhuman, and so on. Therefore, rather than focusing simply on 'waste and women,' this thesis engages with gender theories to investigate the ways in which waste intersects with broader structures of social hierarchy and power.

Theoretical Contribution

A major theoretical contribution of this thesis is its examination of the relationship between waste and modernity from a gendered perspective. As shown in the literature review above, while scholars have looked into the connection between waste and gender, and gender

theories have proven to be valuable frameworks in studying waste, gender remains largely overlooked in discussions of waste and modernity. However, as many scholars have pointed out, modernity—like waste—is not a neutral concept but rather underpinned by pervasive gendered assumptions. In her book *The gender of modernity*, Rita Felski (1995) argues that 'gender affects not just the factual content of historical knowledge—what is included and what gets left out—but also the philosophical assumptions underlying our interpretations of the nature and meaning of social processes' (p. 1). Modernity, as she explains, does not simply refer to a set of sociohistorical phenomena—such as capitalism, bureaucracy, technological development, and so on—but more importantly, to 'particular (though often contradictory) experiences of temporality and historical consciousness' (Felski, 1995, p. 9). However, it is male experiences that have been regarded as paradigmatic of modernity, while female experiences of time and history are regarded as secondary or marginal (Felski, 1995, p. 10). A clear example of the male-centered nature of modernity is the common framing of gender equality as the marker of how modern a society is —even though, ironically, women in supposedly highly modernized regions like Europe are still denied equal status with men (Phillips, 2018, p. 838). Women are objectified as measures of modernity—just like industrialization, urbanization, or technological progress. The so-called 'logic' of modernity—that it will unfold inevitably—is, as Phillips (2018) points out, tied from the start to the naturalization of gender differences (p. 837). It is therefore only through feminist politics of equality that 'new social imaginaries are forged'—not through 'the unfolding of an inherent "modern" ideal' (Phillips, 2018, p. 837).

Based on this, my thesis explores not only how everyday practices and narratives surrounding waste are shaped by gender identities and performances, but also how they reflect, reinforce, or challenge the gendered structures embedded in modernity. I approach gender in the same way Lisa Rofel (1999) does in her *Other modernities: gendered yearnings*

in China after Socialism, viewing it as 'compelled through, rather than parallel with, other forms of difference, including class, race, and age—or, more precisely, the formation of cohorts based on successive political mobilizations' (p. 4). Rather than seeing gender as an add-on to discussions of waste and modernity, I argue that it is constitutive of the power dynamics that shape how these concepts are constructed and imagined.

By focusing on gender, my thesis also advances theories of waste in relation to modernity by demonstrating that waste is not merely a byproduct of modern life, but an active force in constituting it— and that it structures our embodied, everyday experiences rather than simply representing them. As the following chapters will elaborate, gendered sensory experiences with material waste have been a key part of both individual and collective experiences of modernization in China since the twentieth century. Waste should be understood as 'an agentic force that interacts with and changes the other elements in the mix, including the human' (Alaimo and Hekman, 2008, p.7). Many examples in my thesis will show how, across different historical periods, the materiality of waste—such as its appearance, smell, and associated sounds— has shaped daily life and transformed both urban and rural landscapes. Waste has also contributed to literary and artistic works, not just as a source of inspiration, but as 'a participant in creation.' As Alaimo and Hekman (2008) argue, tackling the many social and environmental problems that we are faced with requires 'ways of understanding the agency, significance, and ongoing transformative power of the world—ways that account for myriad "intra-actions" (in Karen Barad's (2007) terms) between phenomena that are material, discursive, human, more-than-human, corporeal, and technological' (p. 5). Through the lens of these 'intra-actions,' my thesis follows a central theoretical thread to show how the everyday sensory aspects of waste and its meanings are mutually constituted and implicated within deeply gendered dynamics of modernity.

Meanwhile, my focus on the relationship between the material and the symbolic has led me to

adopt ‘ragpicking’ as my research methodology, allowing me to gather and assemble materials, stories, and ideas using approaches that respond to specific temporal and spatial contexts. In doing so, my thesis aims to capture and articulate the complex, heterogeneous entanglements of waste and modernity in everyday life.

Methodology

Focusing on both the materiality of waste and its social construction, my thesis uses a mixed-methods approach—drawn from Benjamin’s notion of ‘ragpicking’—that brings together textual analysis and ethnographic research. This approach has not been widely used so far in studies of waste in the Chinese context, even though, as I have suggested, waste is both highly sensory and rich in symbolic meaning, making it difficult to separate the material from the discursive. Additionally, combining textual and ethnographic methods is an effective way to explore the intra-actions surrounding various waste-related phenomena. In analyzing waste, gender, and modernity, I draw on a wide variety of sources—such as literature, film, artworks, street posters, and newspaper reports— and read them in dialogue with the everyday stories I collected during my fieldwork. By doing so, I am able to explore how waste can illuminate the overlooked and forgotten aspects of modernity through the more diverse and inclusive voices from history and everyday life.

The everyday as text

Viewing everyday life as a text— and reading texts as reflections of everyday life— has long been an established method in the humanities and social sciences. For many scholars, discussions about how to connect different methods often begin with a reconsideration of what constitutes a ‘text’ and how it relates to the lived realities of everyday life. As Pascale Casanova (2005) observes, despite decades of efforts by theorists and critics

to bridge literary and artistic analysis with what they call 'external criticism' —focused on real-world struggles such as the political, social, national, gendered, and ethnic— there remains a lack of theoretical and practical tools to challenge 'the central postulate of internal, text-based...criticism——the total rupture between text and world' (p. 71). One way to bridge this rupture, as Mary Rogers (1984) suggests—drawing on Roland Barthes's idea of the text as a dynamic network of shifting meanings— is to 'translate everyday narratives by showing, most generally, the functions that narrative units serve in the reflexive "accomplishment" of a social situation' (p. 172). In other words, the dynamic interrelation of various actors, events, and phenomena in everyday life lends it a textual quality, which in turn invites interpretation akin to Barthes's method of literary analysis.

Meanwhile, the boundary between creative and anthropological texts is fluid. In his book, *The interpretation of cultures*, Clifford Geertz (1973) argues that anthropological research on culture and social life is more interpretive than many anthropologists would acknowledge. This is because, according to Geertz (1973), culture is made up of 'webs of significance,' and analyzing it—even its most mundane aspects, such as eating, walking, or talking—is essentially 'an interpretive one in search of meaning' (p. 5). Rather than viewing ethnography as an experimental science that seeks universal laws or objective facts, Geertz (1973) sees it as a form of 'thick description.' He explains:

> Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of 'construct a reading of') a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior (Geertz, 1973, p. 10).
>
> [...]
>
> In short, anthropological writings are themselves interpretations [...] They are, thus, fictions; fictions, in the sense that 'something made,' 'something fashioned' [...] not that they are false, unfactual, or merely 'as if' thought experiments (Geertz, 1973, p. 15).

By ‘thick description,’ Geertz emphasizes the importance of going beyond surface observations to uncover the cultural contexts and patterns that give meaning to what might otherwise seem like simple facts. This idea is now well-established across multiple fieldwork-based disciplines and has inspired how I write about the stories I collected in the field. When I describe the people I met, the conversations we had, their everyday lives, and the events we experienced together, I find myself writing more from memory than merely presenting ‘objective data’ collected through structured research methods. Filled with detailed contextual information, tied to specific places, times, people, and personal emotions, these memories can only be meaningfully conveyed through certain narrative forms. As such, I consider my ethnographic accounts comparable to the other narratives examined in this thesis, including fictional ones, as they all embody what Geertz (1973) describes as the object of ethnography: ‘a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures’ (p. 7).

In the same way that the everyday can be read as a text, and ethnographic narratives are inherently interpretive, creative works likewise offer meaningful ethnographic insights. As Rose De Angelis (2002) argues, literary writers can be seen as ethnographers in that ‘they write stories about people and their sentiments, about places and happenings, and about contexts’ (p. 3). Literature, alongside other cultural texts, offers a lens through which readers can access social and cultural knowledge about specific communities and societies. In this sense, reading these texts becomes ‘a way of participating in social research’ (De Angelis, 2002, p. 4). Based on this, anthropologists have used creative works as ethnographic material to explore and interpret historical and cultural patterns. For example, in her study of food, sex, and the body in post-socialist China, Judith Farquhar (2002) illustrates how fictional works that employ realist conventions collaborate as ‘wonderful anthropological partners’ in constructing modern Chinese everyday life, embodiment, and practical values (p. 24). Farquhar (2002) emphasizes realism because, from the twentieth century to the present, it has

been endorsed as a valuable and advanced Western tool for meeting the nation's urgent demands of cultural transformation and modernization (pp. 22–23). This tradition remains influential today, as even many works of science fiction still draw on the stylistic and narrative foundations of twentieth-century realism, which adds to the ethnographic richness of creative texts.

Building on these scholarly reflections on the interplay between ethnographic and creative texts, my thesis offers sketches of local lives and embodied everyday experiences of modernity, explored through both the materiality of waste and its symbolic representations across various narrative forms. I also take inspiration from Harriet Evans' (2020) study of marginal lives in Beijing, where she weaves her own 'spatial, material, and sensory knowledge' of a local neighborhood into written, visual, and oral texts collected through archival research and ethnographic work (p. 11). As she suggests, this personal familiarity with the neighborhood and its people has enabled 'a kind of intertextual reading of the relationship between the archive and lived experience' (Evans, 2020, p. 11). Likewise, my physical and emotional connection to the field has created a lived context for interpreting various texts about waste, bringing into focus how they influence one another and can be translated across different forms. I see these translations as modes of 'displacement, drift, invention, mediation, the creation of a link that did not exist before and that to some degree modifies two elements or agents' (Latour 1988, p. 32). My goal in using both textual and ethnographic approaches is thus to examine the interstitial space where the translation of different textual and lived forms occurs across various categories within 'matters of concern' surrounding modernity.

Approach to primary sources

My approach to gathering primary sources resembles that of the nineteenth-century ragpicker in Benjamin's (2002) account of the Paris arcades —collecting overlooked fragments to piece together new constellations of meaning. While conducting fieldwork in China, I combed through both libraries and second-hand bookstores, searching for old newspapers, magazines, novels, and other materials related to the topic of waste. I located relevant materials primarily through keyword searches in library databases. In second-hand bookstores, I sought assistance from shop owners, who searched their digital and paper records or drew on their personal knowledge. The way my searches led me to the corners of libraries and bookshops where old books and back issues were stored, or to piles of materials set aside for removal, mirrors how Benjamin collected images and thoughts in the deserted Paris arcades. In addition, when I found relevant information online, such as a dated news article about an art exhibition from a local newspaper, I dug deeper and tried to reach out to the artist. Therefore, my primary sources are wide-ranging, from works by major literary figures like Lu Xun and Lao She, and celebrated artists such as Xu Bing, to lesser-known materials—like short stories from old newspapers and anonymous video clips of recyclers in Republican-era Beijing. My selection of texts for analysis also follows Benjamin's (2002) concept of gathering 'the refuse of history' (p. 460). I focused on less examined aspects of works by major literary and artistic figures and on works that have received little scholarly attention, while considering how closely they relate to my thesis's central thread: the gendered, everyday sensory experience of waste. This variety of sources allows me to combine close reading with what Franco Moretti (2000) calls 'distant reading.' By 'distance,' Moretti (2000) refers to 'a condition of knowledge' which 'allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems' (p. 57). While close reading helps uncover how waste shapes individual texts, distant reading reveals broader patterns and trends in how waste has been represented across

Chinese history. Since my thesis explores these patterns and trends, I pay equal attention to how different texts engage with real-world conditions—whether in similar or contrasting ways—and to the multiple layers of meaning within them. In translating the texts, I sought to capture both the explicit and implicit meanings of the words and sentences, along with their tone and style, paying attention to how the language reflects the texts' local cultural contexts.

While doing ethnography, the time I spent wandering through cities and the countryside, observing the everyday life of streets and neighborhoods, reminded me once again of the ragpicker, or perhaps more so this time, the flâneur. Benjamin sees the flâneur—originating in Charles Baudelaire's writings as an observer of modern urban life—as a creator of texts, whether literary, visual, or sociological, through their observation and engagement with the city (Frisby, 2001). However, unlike the flâneur—whose observations, as Benjamin describes, arise from a sense of detachment and alienation from the modern urban life (Frisby, 2001)—my engagement is grounded in direct interaction with, and active participation in, the local environment and community. In fact, much of the 'data' in my thesis comes from casual and spontaneous conversations with people I met in the field, as well as from unexpected events and chance encounters, rather than from formal observations or interviews. Because of this, my ethnography was inherently sensory —what Sarah Pink (2015) describes as an approach that recognizes 'the multisensoriality of experience, perception, knowing and practice [...as] integral both to the lives of people who participate in our research and to how we ethnographers practise our craft' (p. 1). I paid attention not only to the sensory experience of waste—how its smells and sounds affect daily life—but also to the emotional atmosphere it creates, such as residents' mixed feelings about waste management practices and my own sadness at seeing a historic neighborhood on the verge of demolition. By highlighting the sensory and emotional dimensions of ethnographic research

on waste, I suggest that sensory knowledge—though often marginalized in text-based academic traditions—is a valid and meaningful way of knowing.

Field sites, participants, and data collection

In a similar way to my collection and selection of primary sources, my ethnographic journey also follows the 'ragpicking' approach. This is first reflected in the way I conducted fieldwork in several locations with different geographical and cultural contexts. Despite their differences, these sites offered stories and experiences that together enhance our understanding of waste, gender, and modernity. Between February and November 2023, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork primarily in urban Xiamen and Shanghai, two rural villages in Zhejiang Province, and Chang Island in Shandong Province. In Xiamen and Shanghai, alongside archival research in municipal libraries, university libraries, and local bookshops, I carried out fieldwork in eight neighborhoods—four in each city. I typically spent about ten days in each neighborhood, from morning to night, engaging mainly with waste workers, sanitation workers, local residents, and employees of property management companies. I also, through introductions from several participants, came to know people outside those neighborhoods, including their friends and family members. In Zhejiang, I spent about a month in two villages where activist Chen Liwen (陈立雯) was working on her 'Zero Waste Village' project. Through Chen, I not only participated in her project but also had conversations with activists, volunteers, and local government officials, all of whom play important roles in rural waste management. My final field site was Chang Island, where I spent about two weeks with artist Fu Junsheng (付军胜), who had been creating artworks from seashore waste for six years by the time I visited. At all of these sites, I collected data through participant observation combined with ethnographic interviews. I also took

photographs where allowed, capturing murals, posters, banners, and other forms of street art that reflect themes of waste reduction, garbage management, and recycling.

The selection of these sites was guided by their relevance to my research questions and by practical considerations of accessibility. To begin with, both Shanghai and Xiamen were among the first eight pilot cities to implement waste sorting practices in the year of 2000 (Li, 2021).[2] While the effects of the 2000 call-out were limited (Li, 2021), in 2017, with the ninth BRICS summit being held in Xiamen, the city enforced mandatory waste sorting through legislation (*Xiamen tongguo lifa*, 2018). Shanghai, on the other hand, introduced city-wide compulsory household waste sorting in July 2019, following President Xi Jinping's visit in the previous year, during which he emphasized that 'waste handling requires everyone's participation' (Jiang, 2022). These new policies reconfigured the distribution of labor within urban waste management, turning waste work into a space where different kinds of value—economic, social, and environmental—are negotiated. Consequently, compared with other cities where compulsory waste sorting has either not been carried out or has not been enacted in such a swift and coercive way, Shanghai and Xiamen stand out as places where the complexity of the labor and identities of cleaners and waste workers, as well as their diverse experiences of navigating life changes and moments of uncertainty, are most likely to be observed. Moreover, my familiarity with the local environment and communities in Shanghai and Xiamen allowed me to find 'gate-keepers' and establish rapport with my participants in these two locations more easily. To many of the waste workers I interacted with, I came across more of a 'talkative' local young resident that sometimes reminded them of their children, rather than a researcher seeking to gather data and information from them. To me, since most of them were seniors, they reminded me of my own parents and grandparents. This position of being an 'insider' caused certain challenges, such as 'over-

[2] The other cities were Beijing, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Hangzhou, Nanjing, and Guilin.

identification' (Glesne, 2016), making it difficult for me to separate my personal feelings from those of my participants. Nevertheless, it also provided opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of the daily, lived experiences of cleaners and waste workers that might not have been possible otherwise.

I chose the two villages in Zhejiang as research sites based on similar reasoning. Firstly, Zhejiang has been a key region for studying rural waste management, as it represents a 'prototype region [...] where rural areas are undergoing rapid urbanization and are confronted with great environmental challenges' (Guan, Y. *et al*., 2015, p. 723). The fast changes in lifestyles, rural landscapes, and the structures and policies of governance have made Zhejiang a place where the contemporary Chinese dream of modernity takes tangible form. As I will explain in my thesis, a key aspect of Zhejiang's modernization is its leading role in developing waste management facilities and promoting waste sorting—some villages even adopted these practices before major cities like Shanghai and Xiamen. Since waste has been a major concern in both local governance and the everyday lives of villagers in Zhejiang, it serves as an ideal setting for my research on waste and modernity in the rural context. In addition, my gatekeeper, Chen Liwen, the founder of The Zero Waste Village—one of China's leading NGOs focused on rural waste management—worked in Zhejiang in 2023. With her help, I was able to connect with individuals such as government officials and gain insights into waste governance that would have otherwise been difficult to access.

My connection with Fu Junsheng, which took me to Chang Island, is another example of how I implemented 'ragpicking' approach. I first learned about Fu and his work from a short article in an old magazine tucked away in a corner of Xiamen's municipal library. That encounter then prompted me to do online research, eventually leading me to get in touch with Fu, who welcomed me to visit his studio on the island. While many Chinese artists explore the theme of waste, Fu's work, which remains little known to the public, is particularly

relevant to my research because it is deeply grounded in everyday life and connects the materiality of waste with its symbolic significance. Moreover, Fu's approach to both art and life embodies the persona of the ragpicker, while enriching it with distinct layers of historical depth and social complexity.

Throughout my fieldwork, I preferred to conceptualize my data collection method as what Glesne (2016) terms 'accompaniment.' (p. 172) According to Glesne (2016), accompaniment works better to fulfill a research purpose of solidarity, which implies 'working with others in a research endeavor determined by others' needs and perceptions in conjunction with our own' (p. 171). This is particularly reflective of my experience. During my fieldwork, most of my participants were frequently occupied with multiple tasks, moving around and managing various responsibilities simultaneously, so they would generally turn down requests for pre-structured interviews. However, they were pleased to be accompanied and have chats while working because, for many of them, they rarely had the opportunity to talk with people other than their colleagues and families. Even with Chen and Fu, whose schedules were more flexible, they preferred that I take part in their daily routines rather than sit down for formal interviews. Both of them remarked that, although people from various fields—such as journalists and scholars—often visited them, it was meaningful to them that I was interested in the most mundane aspects of their work and lives, rather than focusing solely on information useful for reports or scholarly analysis. By prioritizing the daily tasks and emotional needs of my participants, I tried to reduce any potential stress or disruption my presence might have caused.

Positionality and reflexivity

As previously noted, like many scholars trained in the West who choose to conduct fieldwork in their home countries (Giwa, 2015), I conceptualize my field sites as both spaces

of academic inquiry and as places of personal and cultural belonging. This dual identity—as both an insider and an outsider— had a particular impact on my fieldwork in Xiamen and Shanghai, where I conducted research within my own neighborhoods. On one hand, my familiarity with the local environment, people, and languages made data collection easier. Once people realized I was from the area, they became more open and relaxed. Even though I explained my research and consent forms at the start, they often forgot about them and treated me like any other local resident, happily chatting with me. On the other hand, being an insider could sometimes make participants reluctant to talk about certain topics. For example, waste and sanitation workers employed by property management companies tended to hold back from voicing their complaints in my presence. Although I assured them that our conversations would remain anonymous and confidential, the fact that I was also a resident—someone who could potentially report them to property management—made some feel they could not fully trust me.

Being a young woman also influenced how I conducted and experienced my ethnographic research. In most cases, especially with waste and sanitation workers, as well as urban and rural residents, being a woman made it easier for me to approach them. In particular, it was more effortless for me to join their conversations and be accepted into their circles, as young women were often seen as 'friendly and harmless.' However, when interacting with village officials in Zhejiang, my identity as a young female student made them see me as inexperienced, and many of them did not take my project seriously. As Yawei Zhao (2016) points out, being an insider as a researcher means being expected to be 'conversant with Chinese way of communication' (p. 189). Because I was seen as an insider—a fellow Chinese— the village officials assumed I understood the unspoken rule: their schedules constantly changed to accommodate those of higher-ranking officials. They also expected me to be accustomed to the gender hierarchies, where women are considered

less important than men in public affairs. As a result, it was difficult to engage in in-depth, extended conversations with the village officials. Despite the challenges, I was able to gather the information I needed for my project, thanks to Chen's help, which I will discuss in more detail later in the thesis.

Thesis outline

The structure of my thesis follows three temporal frames: the past, the present, and the future. Nevertheless, this does not mean that I see each temporal frame as a self-contained historical vacuum with fixed, clear-cut boundaries. Rather, they overlap and continuously influence one another. Throughout my thesis, I demonstrate how objects, symbols, and narratives of waste from the past continue to inform everyday life in the present and shape visions of the future. At the same time, I explore how imagined futures influence how we make sense of the past and navigate the present. As Allon, Barcan, and Eddison-Cogan (2020) observe, the temporalities of waste are decidedly non-linear. This is evident in the enduring presence of certain materials, the unimaginable lifespans of some types of waste, and the cyclical rhythms of renewal, repair, and revival. As such, waste disrupts the idea of modernity as a linear progression and invites us to explore its fractures, contradictions, and complexities.

Section 1 analyzes the everyday practices and discursive constructions of waste in the twentieth century, with particular focus on the Republican era (1912-1949) and the socialist era (1949-the late 1970s), and how they shaped ideas about modernity and gender that still inform contemporary life. In Chapter 1, I draw on archival research to examine how waste was represented in historical texts, arguing that practices and portrayals of waste played a key role in the construction of multiple modern identities. Following Chapter 1, Chapter 2 takes a

closer look at the gendered patterns in these texts, showing how waste has become both a site of gender-based oppression and a space for resistance.

Building on the historical context from Section 1, Section 2 explores how the legacies of the twentieth century—both in waste management and the discourses around it—continue to shape contemporary life. Chapter 3 presents findings on urban neighborhood waste sorting, which is closely connected to China's 'Ecological Civilization' initiative—a key part of the nation's modernization efforts. It argues that waste management in contemporary China is, at its core, sensory governance, driven by the goals of reinforcing patrilineal family values to maintain social stability. Shifting the focus from governance to people, Chapter 4 tells the stories of urban waste workers who, despite playing a vital role in waste-sorting initiatives, are often overlooked and marginalized. It demonstrates that urban waste workers occupy a liminal position, constantly moving between different boundaries—formal and informal, domestic and public spheres, and individual identity and family roles. Chapter 5 examines the relationship between waste, gender, and modernity in the rural context. It further investigates how waste generates new forms of mobility —such as activists, volunteers, and urban residents moving to the countryside—while also creating tensions and negotiations among different social groups, leading to shifts in governance and reshaping rural life as a distinct expression of modernity.

Section 3 adopts a futurological perspective to consider how waste can inspire both the imagination and the pursuit of alternative futures —futures that may offer pathways to confront and potentially transcend the ruptures of modernity discussed in this thesis. Through analyses of contemporary Chinese waste art, Chapter 6 reveals how waste is not merely a subject of representation, but instead becomes an active agent that participates in the artistic process and meaning-making. Drawing on the life stories of artist Fu Junsheng, who understands his relationship with waste through traditional Chinese conceptions of time and

nature, this chapter suggests that the artworks examined envision a more inclusive future, where the distinctions between humans and non-humans, subjects and objects, and nature and culture are dismantled. While Chapter 6 discusses the future as a temporal concept, Chapter 7 delves into it as a spatial one. Combining creative narratives like science fiction with ethnographic stories from the field, this chapter demonstrates that in both cultural representations of and everyday interactions with waste, the future is often imagined as destinations free from class, gender, and species struggles—destinations that, though difficult to attain, continue to guide our present lives.

Section I.

Redefining waste in twentieth-century China

Section introduction

Amid neatly folded clothes, boxes of loose buttons, scraps of fabric, and stacks of used plastic bottles and paper bags, a small, focused old lady named Zhao Xiangyuan (赵湘源) is seen busy organizing her belongings (Figure 1). The items and detritus that she had accumulated over the past half-century were transported from her *hutong* home in Beijing to museums in Gwangju, New York, London, and other cities around the world.[3] While many, including her own children, saw these discarded objects as useless clutter, Zhao cherished them because they 'formed new memories' and gave her 'an illusory safety and warmth' after her husband's death in 2002 (Lin and Liu, no date). As Zhao unpacked, cleaned, and arranged her belongings, she became part of the memories and stories that her son, artist Song Dong (宋冬), sought to convey through his exhibition *Waste not* (*Wujin qiyong*; 物尽其用). By transforming 'waste' into artifacts, Song reconnected with his mother and helped her heal from loss and grief.

Figure 1. *Waste not* (2009) by Song Dong. Available at: https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/960? (Accessed 31 July 2023).

[3] A *hutong* is a narrow alley or lane commonly found in northern Chinese cities, especially in Beijing.

Zhao is not the only one who recycles to remember. The exhibition's title, which translates from Chinese to mean 'make full use of everything,' suggests that her obsession with 'waste' is more of a long-standing habit passed down through generations of Chinese people than a pathological problem, as her son initially worried. Art historian Wu Hung (2009), who was on Song's curation team, observes that the exhibition captures a collective memory characterized by 'the shortage of goods, the anxiety instigated by political instability, and the traditional virtue of frugality' (p. 31). Rooted in daily routines and tied to personal emotions, yet often overlooked in historical narratives, the 'waste' collected by Zhao and others like her can be viewed as what Benjamin (2002) terms 'the refuse of history' (p. 460). In *The arcades project*, Benjamin portrays the Paris arcades as 'dialectical images' reflecting the clash between old artistic styles and emerging industrial culture and technology. The glass and iron used in building the arcades showcase the cutting-edge technology of the nineteenth century, while the interior design of the halls, galleries, and shops reflects a deep appreciation for antique and classical architectural styles. This fusion of past and present represents a 'moment of awakening' (Benjamin, 2002, p. 462), where the collective dream of a utopian future is shattered by the realization that these images are only transitory. According to Benjamin, dialectical images appear during times of societal transition, when a new culture has not yet taken shape. In these periods, the collective imagination, trying to move beyond the recent past while waiting for a new cultural form to emerge, often draws on inspiration and hopes from a more distant past. Zhao's old house, emptied out like the Paris arcades with everything moved to museums, can be seen as a dialectical image—she struggled with her recent past and present while holding onto objects from the time when her husband was still alive.

Stories about waste, therefore, include texts and images that capture the transitoriness of everyday life as China moves toward modernization. As the next two chapters will show,

the profound social and cultural changes brought by China's modernization in the twentieth century reshaped not only how people managed waste but also society's perceptions of what was considered waste and what was not. Urban expansion and the growth of consumer culture led to more consumption and waste, driving the development of new waste management methods. At the same time, incessant revolutions, wars, and political upheaval fueled a culture of frugality, resulting in widespread practices of saving, recycling, collecting, and hoarding. The conflicting behaviors and values around waste play out in the daily lives of millions of families like the Songs, reflecting the broader transformations in culture and social norms. Ongoing clashes between different ideas, cultures, and ideologies—Westernization versus traditional Chinese culture, liberalism versus communism, bourgeoisie versus proletariat—created distinct value systems that gave 'waste' different meanings. Because stories about waste are fundamentally about what was once valued, they provide insights into the lost memories and forgotten pasts of China's modernization.

This section explores the shifting meanings of waste as reflected in cultural representations and everyday narratives in twentieth-century China, with a focus on the Republican era and the socialist era. As the next two chapters will demonstrate, the term 'waste' has historically carried a wide range of connotations, from outdated writing topics to national enemies that needed to be eliminated. These symbolic interpretations, however, will not make much sense without looking at the physical aspects of waste. Indeed, since modern lifestyles and identities are so closely tied to material things, it is not surprising that people's ideas about waste are shaped by its look, feel, and smell, as well as by public and individual interactions with it. By focusing on both the materiality of waste and its cultural representations, this section seeks to illuminate a sensory history of Chinese modernity, exploring not just how modernity was written and seen, but also how it was heard, felt, touched, and smelled in everyday life.

Centering on how waste has sparked both public debate and personal reflection on social classifications, particularly those linked to identity, this section shows that modernization involves ongoing practices of dumping and recycling, which reflect its underlying value system and mechanisms of exclusion. Scholars have viewed late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century China as a 'transitional' period that ended dynastic rule and ushered in a constitutional nation, leading to widespread changes in everyday life and values (Zarrow, 2006, p. 3).[4] Economically, the new Republican government sought to modernize the nation by promoting local industries and revitalizing urban areas. Culturally, mass movements such as the May Fourth Movement of 1919—sparked by student protests against the government's weak response to the *Treaty of Versailles*—played a pivotal role in advancing social and cultural reform. Political, social, and cultural transformations gave rise to the belief that, as Ruth Rogaski (2004) observes, the Chinese body, often perceived as dirty, weak, and closely associated with unsanitary environments, needed modernization through Westernized approaches to health, sanitation, and hygiene. While modernization brought many new changes, it simultaneously 'dumped' and excluded some existing cultures, ideas, and communities. In the socialist era, although the definition and experience of modernity changed, it continued to reconfigure societal values that influenced everyday life. Despite socioeconomic progress, such as enhanced industrialization, it was a time of political upheaval—most notably the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)—which led to widespread social disruption. 'Dumping,' in that historical context, was often symbolically linked to political and cultural oppression.

The section also sets the stage for later discussions on waste as a gendered force, offering historical context for how waste management and imageries, across various periods,

[4] The 1911 Revolution, also known as the Xinhai Revolution (辛亥革命), brought an end to China's last imperial dynasty, the Qing, and led to the creation of the Republic of China.

have been deeply implicated in the practice of gender subjectivity. Different roles and responsibilities around what were considered 'valuable' gave waste distinct meanings for men and women, while shifting gender discourses and practices continually redefined those meanings. As the next two chapters will illustrate, certain types of 'waste' and waste-related behaviors were often associated with women in the twentieth century— like entertaining novels aimed at female audiences and education on waste removal within families and communities —and women were more frequently labeled as 'waste' in mainstream cultural narratives. However, there are stories that challenge the assumption linking women and waste—the belief that femininity equates to ignorance and domesticity. Even though these stories, mostly created and told by women, have often been considered 'insignificant' and thus 'disposable' in Chinese cultural history, they offer a window into everyday resistance against gender inequalities and oppression.

Tracing the whereabouts of 'waste-site stories'—as termed by Neville and Villeneuve (2002)—in the twentieth century, Chapters 1 and 2 will show how waste—in this context referring not only to garbage, but also to objects, texts, and images from the past—reproduces history by preserving lost meanings, identities, and memories. This is one way in which waste, itself 'a product of time' (Hawkins and Muecke, 2003, p. xiv), can blend different temporalities. Much like the items in Song's exhibition that continue to influence his life long after his mother's passing, the stories from the twentieth century still shape how we understand and handle waste today.

Chapter 1.
Waste and the making of modern identities

The type and quantity of waste a family produces can reveal a lot about their social standing and background. Whether it's a lot or a little, refined or coarse, it reflects whether the family is old money or newly rich, scholarly or business-oriented, sincere or pretentious. Simply put, what someone throws away reveals a lot about what they consume and who they are.

—Liang Shiqiu (梁实秋)

The passage above, from Liang Shiqiu's (1948) essay *Beiping's waste* (*Beiping de laji*; 北平的垃圾), vividly depicts how waste was closely tied to a person's or family's social identity in Republican-era Beijing. As Liang notes, with no effective management in place, most people handled household waste by 'opening the door...and dumping the entire bin out' (p. 11). As a result, even with their doors closed, the waste put their lives 'on public display' (p. 11). Waste also shaped how people perceived their own identity. In a short story titled *Confessions of a waste child* (*Laji haizi de zibai*; 垃圾孩子的自白), a child who lives by collecting waste asks his friends, 'If you knew who I truly am, would you still let me call you "friend"?' (Ouyang, 1946, p. 21). The child's connection to waste makes him see his 'true self' as inferior and less worthy compared to his peers.

Inspired by these two examples, this chapter explores how everyday narratives and representations of waste were intertwined with the formation of identity in both Republican and Socialist China. It argues that the ambiguous nature of waste makes it a flexible symbol or metaphor, triggering different narratives and practices related to modern identities. While public discourses on waste aimed to create a unified national identity aligned with the state's modernization goals, individual reactions were often complex and sometimes contradictory. In a time when nearly everything was tied to nation-building, the concept of waste provided an alternative space where people could engage in and contemplate activities deemed 'non-

progressive' —such as love affairs, gossip, and daydreaming— without facing criticism or censorship from prevailing nationalistic narratives. At the center of conflicts between groups like coolies and urban policemen, slum residents and landlords, and artists and extreme revolutionaries, waste—both materially and conceptually—sparked resistance and disruption.

The idea that representations of waste are shaped by historical moments that transform people's identities is not unique to China. In Meiji Japan (1868-1912), faced with European imperialism, the reformists sought solutions from Western waste management systems, viewing them as crucial for attaining 'wealth and power for the nation' (Rogaski, 2004, p. 201). Throughout the twentieth century, waste consciousness and cleanliness came to symbolize 'Japaneseness'—denoting modernization and development to outsiders, while serving as a key indicator of middle-classness within Japan (Siniawer, 2018, p. 9-11). Postwar globalization facilitated the flow of waste across regions, giving rise to new identities like the 'cosmopolitan workers' in Lucy Walker's documentary *Waste land* (2010), who, despite living in a remote landfill outside Rio de Janeiro, remain deeply connected to the distant origins of the waste they process.

While scholars in China studies have explored the relationship between waste and identity, as mentioned in the Introduction, most of their discussions have centered on how state policies and governance shaped people's identities in the twentieth century (Landsberger, 2017; Goldstein, 2021). It remains unexamined how waste itself played a significant role in constructing identities through sensual experiences and cultural representations, as well as how these processes gave the term 'waste' new meanings. Identity-making, which involves creating the 'dynamics of social relations, actions, and interactions' (Schoppa, 2014, p. 4), along with individual stories and memories, is deeply rooted in the tensions of modernity. As explained in the Introduction, modernity's tendency to fit all subjects into a single historical framework or linear narrative—while discarding

those deemed unfit—mirrors the processes of producing and dumping waste. What gets discarded are memories, practices, and imaginaries— all constitutive parts of one's identity —that do not align with the universal path of constant, irreversible progress. This chapter uncovers these lost identities preserved within the materiality and concept of waste.

Waste and national identity

The formation of the notion of waste has been closely tied to the development of national identity in Chinese society. In contemporary Mandarin usage, the term '*yang laji*' (洋垃圾; foreign garbage) refers to both legally and illegally imported solid waste from abroad. In 2018, the Chinese government implemented a ban on the imports of 24 grades of solid waste. Following that, the slogan 'China should say no to foreign garbage' went viral on social media, igniting widespread anger against major waste exporters like the US, Japan, and Europe, while also instilling the public's determination to protect the Chinese homeland (Lin, Zhong and Lan, 2019). During the Covid-19 pandemic, anti-*yang laji* sentiments were projected onto foreigners, with the media portraying those who ignored quarantine and mask-wearing rules as being tossed into garbage bins (China Digital Times, 2020). Waste has become a symbol to accentuate the disciplined, clean national 'self' while denouncing the dangerous, contaminated foreign 'other.'

This way of classifying what/who is Chinese and what/who is not—often coinciding with how valuables and waste are categorized—is not just a recent trend. The making of modern Chinese identities has been accompanied by the ongoing debate over what to keep and what to discard —a struggle between Western modernity and Chinese tradition—since the late nineteenth century. The pursuit of foreign technologies and values considered 'modern' led to 'the constant wrecking of the past,' creating a sense of cultural loss and

displacement within the Chinese self (Cao and Wu, 2017, p. 2). In an essay by Lu Xun (鲁迅), he remarks:

> There are some places in the concession that make you feel relaxed, such as the residential areas. However, the slum where the middle-tier Chinese live is certainly not one of them. The slum is sweltering, teeming with food stalls, the noise of *huqin*,[5] mahjong, phonograph, and garbage bins, bare bodies and legs (Lu Xun, 1933).

Lu Xun's emphasis on the contrast between the clean, well-maintained foreign-occupied areas and the dirty, chaotic Chinese slums exemplifies how physical waste often came to symbolize Chineseness during the Republican era. In semi-colonial Shanghai, the identities of the city residents were shaped by the boundaries of three municipalities: the International Settlement, the French Concession, and the Chinese city. In each municipality, residents were subject to different local and colonial rules, which significantly shaped their way of life, including housing, sanitation, and social security.[6] The segregation of urban landscape also dictated the hierarchy of people: foreigners held the highest socio-economic status, while the Chinese was classified into several tiers. As Lu Xun describes, where physical borders failed to separate people, waste became a marker that distinguished the Chinese from foreigners and highlighted social tiers within the Chinese community. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Lu Xun depicts Chinese bodies amid garbage, noise, and the mingling of food and sweat odors, which stands in sharp contrast to the foreign concessions and reveals the metaphorical connection between waste and Chinese identity. While Chinese society today strives to distance itself from 'foreign waste,' a century ago it perceived itself, albeit

[5] The *huqin* is a traditional Chinese stringed instrument.

[6] The British and American authorities predominantly had control over the International Settlement, but as more foreign powers entered Shanghai in the early twentieth century, their nationals also became part of the settlement's administration. However, unlike the French concession, the International Settlement had no formal authority over the Shanghai Municipal Police (Jackson, 2018, p. 14).

reluctantly, as more expendable and susceptible to being discarded in the realm of international competition.

The belief that China was falling behind in modernization led to the idea that even foreign waste was superior to its Chinese counterpart. In 1946, the newspaper *Daily Knowledge* (*Shenghuo Zhishi*; 生活知識) published a vignette that read:

> In the past, the British-run construction ministry invested a substantial amount of money in constructing a massive Western-style building on Penang Road in Shanghai. The building was intended for waste incineration. It had been said that waste incineration produced a lucrative form of glycerin. But guess what? The Chinese waste turned out to be of significantly lower quality compared to foreign waste. As a result, glycerin extraction was minimal…The British was greatly disappointed, considering how much money they had thrown at the project. Eventually, they were forced to shut down the facility!" (*Laji yeshi guowai de hao*, 1946, p. 17)

Beyond jesting at the British colonial government, the vignette captures the prevailing sentiment of defeat and pain that permeated China. The title, which can be translated as 'Even for waste, the foreign is better than the Chinese,' alludes to the collective anguish caused by imperialism, wars, disease, and other forms of suffering. On the surface, the author of the vignette mocks China's weakness, which is a common theme in cultural production during that period. However, the satirical and self-deprecating tone is later contrasted by a serious, poignant explanation. The author attributes the low quality of waste to the extreme poverty experienced by Chinese people, as 'they had very little to throw away' and 'any items that held minimal value were swiftly claimed by children who sourced through the garbage dump' (*Laji yeshi guowai de hao*, 1946, p. 17). For the author and other Chinese elites, while it was reasonable, albeit unwillingly, to acknowledge the superiority of Western culture, science, and politics, the idea that even waste could serve as a testament to China's inferiority seemed unacceptable. Waste, in this sense, entailed physical and emotional experiences of pain, shame, and suffering that profoundly shaped modern Chinese identity.

The symbolic meanings of waste changed during the second Sino-Japanese war as the nation's primary focus shifted towards resisting the Japanese invasion.[7] In newspapers and magazines, the term 'waste' was often used to describe those who hindered the fight against the enemy. In an article published in *The War Drums Weekly* (*Zhangu Zhoukan*; 戰鼓週刊), the author identifies three types of 'waste in the battle to safeguard our country from extinction' (*jiuwang de laji*; 救亡的垃圾): war profiteers, politicians who are all talk and no action, and opportunists who seek personal power through the war (Xiu Mei, 1939, p. 20-21). Also labeled as 'decaying objects,' 'parasites,' 'germs,' and 'dross,' these people were considered as 'traitors to the national resistance' and therefore should be 'swept away and eliminated by the force of current era' (Xiu Mei, 1939, p. 21). The metaphor of sweeping trash was employed to advocate for social reform as well. In an article about transportation systems, writer Ye Ma compares the act of ignoring or concealing problems to hiding waste in the corners of one's yard. Ye Ma explains that when sweeping floors at home, the Chinese has the custom of starting from the center and allowing the waste to accumulate in the corners, whereas foreigners follow an opposite approach and promptly remove the waste pile. The Chinese way of cleaning, Ye Ma (1939) argues, proves a tendency for the Chinese to be 'feckless and obstinate to reform as long as they believe that their waste remains hidden from others' (p. 329). Waste, in this context, stands for the multitude social problems that China faced.

Starting in the 1950s, public discourses around waste were governed by the Patriotic Hygiene Campaigns (*Aiguo Weisheng Yundong*; 爱国卫生运动) to construct a 'clean, new' identity that would benefit the socialist nation. Initially prompted by the fear of germ warfare during the Korean War (1950-1953), the Patriotic Hygiene Campaigns consisted of mass

[7] The full-scale war spanned from 1937 to 1945, although some historians considered the Japanese seizure of Manchuria in 1931 as the start of the war.

movements in cities and rural areas across China to improve sanitation and prevent epidemics such as cholera, diarrhea, hookworm, and other diseases.[8] Under such circumstances, while municipal solid waste continued to be a problem, the media's focus shifted to waste directly linked to disease. For example, the nation-wide movements to eliminate dirt, pests, stool, and rot from rivers and ditches provided inspiration for various creative works. Among them, the three-act drama *Dragon beard ditch* (*Longxu gou*; 龙须沟) by Lao She (老舍) emerged as the most influential one. Completed in 1951 and named after an underprivileged ghetto along the filthy Dragon Beard Ditch in South Beijing, the drama envisions a transformation from pre-1949 misery to a socialist utopia. Before the socialist government's cleaning and reconstruction of the ditch, the inhabitants 'endured the incessant stench every day throughout their entire lives' (Lao She, 1979, p. 1). The dystopian scenes, however, later gives way to an environment filled with flowers and laughter as the ditch was filled up, and new roads and residential compounds were constructed. In the end, the inhabitants, all dressed in new, clean clothes, gathered in the recently built square, singing and applauding:

> The people's government is great! Great, because they reconstruct the stinky ditch; great, because they do it for us poor people. To be fair, there are numerous places in need of renovation, but why prioritize the Dragon Beard Ditch? The reason is simple: the government cares about us and feels bad about us living amidst dirt and filth! A good government loves the poor, and a good government makes you us clean, happy, and confident (Lao She, 1979, p. 95).

As Weijie Song (2017) points out, the drama 'offers a salient, distorted, and imaginary example of the socialist production of space and time' (p. 18). Taking it further, I suggest that the inhabitants' 'rebirth' symbolizes the recreation of national identity —both physically and psychologically—into clean, confident socialist subjects. While the idea of waste loomed

[8] For a thorough introduction to the Patriotic Hygiene Campaigns, refer to Yang, N. (2004).

over the Chinese self-image during the Republican era, it was rhetorically and discursively detached from Chinese identity in the socialist period.

Lao She's drama also shows that during the socialist era, waste represented the persistent threat of imperialism and the exploitation by feudal and capitalist ruling classes. The narrative of waste elimination was essentially connected with the Maoist slogan 'Human conquers the nature' (*ren ding sheng tian*; 人定胜天), which sought to mobilize 'collective agency for realizing the potential power of the people to emerge as historical actors' (Liebman, 2019, p. 540).[9] In addition to overcoming waste, another way to maximize collective agency was to make the most of it and transform it into something useful to aid the nation. Therefore, waste workers, nightmen, and cleaners were considered as respectable and honorable professionals. The story about Shi Chuanxiang (时传祥), a worker who was honored by Mao and other Party leaders in the 1950s due to his exceptional work in emptying people's toilets and transporting excrement to fertilizer factories, exemplifies the ideological link between everyday cleaning practices and contributing to the nation. Originally published in *Workers Daily* (*Gongren Ribao*; 工人日报) in 1995 and was later included in school textbooks, the story traces Shi's life trajectory, which began with the oppression he endured before 1949 and led up to his mental breakdown during the Cultural Revolution, and makes it evident that the 1950s and early 1960s were the time when this link was most pronounced. In the end of the story, by comparing the 1990s to the time when people like Shi were esteemed, the author Sun Dehong (孙德宏; 1995) laments the decline of an ideal Chinese identity characterized by high morality and a willingness to sacrifice for the socialist regime. As this identity was produced and distributed through the narrative of excrement elimination and

[9] The direct translation of '*ren ding sheng tian*' is 'Human conquers tian.' Scholars have debated on the meanings of 'tian,' which can arguably be translated as 'nature' or 'heaven.' In this chapter, I adopt Adam Liebman's (2019) definition, wherein 'tian' refers to 'a (super-) natural historical threat to be overcome by the people' (p. 540).

reutilization, it can be argued that waste also embodies what Ming-Bao Yue (2005) calls 'a post-socialist consciousness longing for…"the unfulfilled dreams" of a better future' (p. 43).

Waste and alternative identities

Even though mainstream discussions about waste were intended to create a coherent national identity in accordance with China's modernization goals, not all representations of waste conformed to this framework. Personal accounts of how people understood and interacted with waste highlight the hybridity of modern Chinese identities. While waste often provoked feelings of disgust, shame, and threat—fueling nationalistic urges for struggle and improvement—it also triggered nostalgia for the past and fostered criticism of existing values, creating spaces where people could develop identities that diverged from, or even contradicted, the patriotic and progressive ideal.

In cultural representations, especially in literature, the concept of waste served as common ground, linking the socially responsible writings of the elite with more popular works. The publishing boom of the 1920s led to a wave of diverse literary genres —love fiction, heroic adventures, scandals, and detective tales—aimed at entertaining a growing urban readership. Despite their popularity, these works were often dismissed by intellectuals and critics as 'useless and at worst pernicious' (Link, 1981, p. 17), because they did not advance nationalistic or revolutionary ideas. To deflect such criticism, writers and publishers used self-mockery, calling their own stories, articles, newspapers, or magazines 'waste.' For example, in a 1933 essay about romantic love, the author begins with a confession:

> With my abode resembling a heap of waste, and the wood within it succumbing to rot, my mouth emitting an unpleasant stench and my voice muddled, should I not feel ashamed to broach the subject of love? Am I not tarnishing its elegance? However, as the wise man often says, 'One's flaws should not hinder their right to express.' Hence, I present the following with a sense of contentment (Xiu Shui, 1933, p. 296).

The author then divides the essay into seven sections, each outlining a stage of unrequited love: the flipped heart, flirting, passion, ennui, breakup, missing, and mourning. The piece is full of strong emotions that would have easily resonated with readers of the time, especially those newly exposed to ideas of free love and unconventional relationships. Despite the essay's modern take on love, its use of classical Chinese and its quotes from *The analects of Confucius* might draw criticism from those advocating for vernacular and Western-style writing. Likely aware of the criticism, the author describes themselves as 'rotten wood' in 'a heap of waste,' which can be seen as both a defensive strategy and a gesture of defiance. On one hand, self-deprecation poses a challenge for others to criticize, since it feels rude and unfair to attack someone who already regards themselves as 'waste.' On the other hand, the Confucian quote suggesting that even waste has a voice is a defiant pushback against the elite's condescending attitude toward 'non-progressive' works.

Newspapers and magazines adopted a similar tactic to allocate content intended for entertainment purposes such as jokes, unofficial history, and celebrity scandals. For instance, *Best of the Week* (*Xinghua*; 星华), a journal that started in 1936 to cover political news and promote anti-war sentiments, included a column called 'The waste bin' (*Laji tong*; 垃圾桶). The description of the column reads as follows:

> We cannot claim with absolute certainty that the waste bin solely harbors dirt and rubbish; nor can we be entirely sure it is only a gathering spot for flies. Perhaps amidst the waste, we can find bamboos and woods (*Laji tong*, 1936, p. 29).

The 'bamboos and woods' turn out to be three anecdotes about notable figures: Writer Shen Congwen (沈從文), who, despite his fame, had no formal education and had served as a soldier; Peking University president Cai Yuanpei (蔡元培), who spent New Year's Eve taking refuge from the war at a former student's home; and politician Dai Jitao (戴季陶), whose modest home was located near the grand Examination Bureau, where he held a

prominent position as head (*Laji tong*, 1936, p. 29). The celebrities, often seen in public as embodiments of modernity and pioneers of nationalistic movements, are endowed with different personas and transformed into more well-rounded, relatable, and sometimes farcical characters. 'The waste bin' thus represents a grey area where the boundaries between the elite and the popular, the serious and the entertaining, and the powerful and the powerless become blurred.

The waste bin's capacity to deconstruct pre-set categories also made it a relatively safe site to bring out content that could otherwise trigger censorship. In the 1920s and 1930s, newspapers and magazines relied heavily on political patronage for survival, making them susceptible to censorship by foreign authorities, the Nationalist and Communist Parties, and local tyrants (MacKinnon, 1997, p. 8). Among these powers, the Nationalist Party's influence on the media was the most extensive, but as the Communist Party rose to prominence, the competition for control of the Chinese press intensified and 'became more ideologically defined' (MacKinnon, 1997, p. 16). As a result, it was difficult for newspapers and magazines backed by a particular side to report impartially on news from the opposing side. However, despite being under Party surveillance, some editors managed to publish 'sensitive' information by categorizing it as 'waste.' For example, the Beijing-based *Social News Weekly* (*Shewen Zhoubao*; 社聞週報) featured a regular column called 'The waste dump' (*Laji dui*; 垃圾堆), which intermittently addresses news related to the Communist Party and presents critiques, albeit in an implicit and tactful manner, of the Nationalist Party. In one issue, the column endorses a newly released Marxist journal, describing it as 'an excellent companion for all aspiring revolutionary youth' (*Shewen Zhoubao*, 1933, p. 11). In another instance, a vignette titled 'Whose sexual desires are fulfilled?' denounces the Nationalist Party's policy of legalizing prostitution. By contrasting the self-serving desires of the 'potbellied government officials' with the misery of the women coerced into prostitution, the vignette

condemns the Nationalist Party for its corruption (*Shewen Zhoubao*, 1933, p. 12). Although *Social News Weekly* claims itself to be 'independent and not affiliated with any institution' (*Shewen Zhoubao*, 1933, p. 1), its choice of terms such as '*chiqu*' (Communist-controlled/the red area; 赤區) and '*jiaogong*' (suppressing Communist bandits; 剿共) reveals its alignment with the Nationalist Party. Through the 'Waste dump' column, the journal expresses alternative voices that not only challenge the censorship but also dismantle the predetermined ideological stances imposed on the Chinese press.

During the socialist period, newspapers and magazines no longer included sections for anecdotes and entertainment unrelated to nation building, as the Communist Party implemented a series of rules to enhance its control over the media (Stockmann, 2012). However, the image of waste continued to inspire people to explore identities that were marginalized or even denied by the socialist narratives. In Chen Yingsong's (陈应松; 2021) short story *Waste* (*Laji*; 垃圾), he reminisces about the 1950s and 1960s, when his family lived near a large waste pit in their village. The story chronicles a decade-long conflict between the Wu family (a pseudonym for the author's own family) and their neighbor, the Zheng family, over the waste pit's location, management, and profits. The social and political movements of the time are briefly mentioned, but their significance fades as the characters are preoccupied with activities that have little to do with the socialist ideals they are supposed to follow. For example, while the initial cause for the expansion of the waste pit is the Communist government's push for fertilizer production to increase grain yields, the Wu and Zheng families turn it into a personal rivalry, each seeking to demonstrate a better quality of life. The Zheng family enlarges the pit to raise loach fish so that they can make the famous dish 'braised tofu with loach fish,' while the Wu family plants willow trees along the pit, transforming it into a cool spot for enjoying summer evenings. Little Wu (the author) and Little Zheng, despite the two families' rivalry, become close friends, drawn together by their

shared habit of sitting by the pit, ‘gazing at the moon and stars reflected on the pungent water’s surface,’ humming local songs, and daydreaming about the young teachers at school (Chen, 2021, p. 46).

In an era marked by the suppression of individual desires, the characters find comfort for their cravings for food, relaxation, sexuality, and artistic expression through their interactions with waste. Little Wu eventually becomes a poet, specializing in writing about waste. When asked why he chooses this path, he explaines:

> Who wouldn’t want a childhood filled with bamboo flutes and meandering rivers? Who wouldn’t enjoy strolling down the bluestone alleyway, holding oil paper umbrellas? It’s not that I don’t want to laud these things, nor do I seek to be different for attention’s sake. I also detest the foul odors and bothersome flies. However, this is how my hometown looks like. This is my memory. I would curse waste, but I won’t reject it entirely. In fact, it was waste that made who I am today. I appreciate it. I should sing a hymn in its honor, raise three glasses of wine in celebration of it…(Chen, 2021, p. 48)

For Little Wu and thus Chen himself, waste reminds him of the poverty and modest living conditions of the 1950s and 1960s, yet it also evokes a nostalgia for a bygone past and an unreturnable home. Towards the end of the story, when Little Wu hears of the rumor about the removal of the waste pit to accommodate a new highway, he feels ‘waves of depression that had never gripped [him] before’ (Chen, 2021, p. 63). Chen’s nostalgia for the waste pit reflects his emotional connection to a past only he experienced. Waste, through which he came to understand his desires and identity, symbolizes both his origins and a legacy ‘to be passed down to future generations’ (Chen, 2021, p. 62).

Mobilizing resistance

While waste imagery elicited narratives that illuminate alternative identities beyond the nationalist and ideological ideal of a patriotic, progressive ‘Chinese identity,’ the materiality of waste also provoked individual and grassroots resistance against social

inequality, discrimination, and political oppression. During the Republican era, urban garbage coolies were notably proactive in organizing protests against their harsh working and living conditions, as reported in the media. In response to the 'mal-treatment of the foreign supervisors,' garbage coolies in Shanghai went on strike, demanding 'an increase of 20 percent in wages, half-day holidays on Saturdays and whole days on Sundays, double pay at the end of the year and an agreement that no coolies can be discharged without adequate reason' (*Garbage men of concession go on strike*, 1931). They also campaigned for better personal safety at work, as garbage coolies were often injured or killed by bombs and grenades (*12-year-old boy killed by bomb in garbage heap*, 1935; *Garbage coolie injured*, 1941). Despite efforts by both foreign and Chinese authorities to resolve the strikes, the coolies 'adamantly refused peaceful negotiation' and 'resist[ed] any attempt to remove the garbage,' making their protest 'the greatest circumspection' for the authorities to manage (*The garbage strike*, 1931). Often overlooked in historical studies of waste management, the coolies' resistance challenges the typical view of waste workers as powerless and submissive, showing them instead as determined and defiant.

After 1949, the Communist government tightened restrictions on public strikes (Xie, 2009), but waste, in its various forms, remained a catalyst for acts of rebellion. During the Cultural Revolution, most books and artworks were labeled as 'feudal, capitalist, or revisionist waste' (*fengzixiu laji*; 封资修垃圾) and banned, with only a few exceptions approved by the government (Song, 2005). For many young people of the time—some of whom had initially helped burn books but later changed their minds —rescuing books and artworks from garbage dumps set to be destroyed became a secret mission in their search for the 'truth' through reading (Song, 2005). The rebellious youth also set up underground reading groups that, despite heavy suppression, grew into a nationwide network for saving, reading, and sharing banned books. Writer Bei Dao (北岛) recalls that in these groups, people

did not just discuss and exchange books—they also created their own works. However, with constant police crackdowns, most of these works were confiscated or lost, and only a few manuscripts survived (Bei Dao, 2008). As the network between different groups expanded, Bei Dao met a wide variety of people from all walks of life, from artists to paper mill workers who would 'steal' a sheet or two of paper each day from work to bring to the group (Bei Dao, 2008). The underground reading groups thus brought together people from diverse backgrounds, even those with opposing political views, forming a 'collective resistance' that 'revived human connections' (Yang, 1994, p. 415).

Along with discarded books, other materials from waste dumps became weapons of resistance against political repression. In 1952, artist Li Qingping (李青萍) was apprehended due to her refusal to partake in 'the Campaign to Suppress Counter-revolutionaries' (*Zhenya Fangeming Yundong*; 镇压反革命运动), one of the initiative political campaigns launched by the Communist government to eradicate opposition forces, especially former Nationalist Party officials. During the 1950s and 1960s, Li was stigmatized as an 'extreme rightist' and was denied even the basic resources needed for survival. Deprived of her home and belongings, Li survived by scavenging for waste on the streets and used whatever she could find—scraps, broken cupboards, toilet paper, charcoal, and leftover pigments—to paint. As she later recalled, waste not only helped her survive but also gave her hope and kept her passion for painting and art alive (Sumiao Huashi, 2022). While most of the works Li created from discarded materials before her rehabilitation in 1979 —when she regained her social status—were lost, her later works, reflecting on her years of oppression, express her pursuit of personal and artistic freedom. In her painting *River in a dream* (*Meng he*; 梦河), bold red strokes fill most of the canvas, representing a river. The red embodies a subtle mix of passion and pain, while the river seems at once both surging and calm. The painting echoes Li's early works of Southeast Asian rivers from her time there (1937-1941), but its use of crimson—

symbolizing blood—reveals a shift in her emotional landscape. After all she had suffered, Li, though still a quiet, graceful woman with a deep passion for painting —like the calm river— carried with her the lasting wounds of pain, anger, and defiance.

Figure 2. *River in a dream* by Li Qingping. Available at: https://sghexport.shobserver.com/html/toutiao/2022/06/17/772728.html (Accessed 3 August 2023).

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how waste, both materially and conceptually, shaped the construction and deconstruction of people's identities during the Republican and socialist eras. It argues that cultural narratives about waste operated at the crossroads of nationalistic efforts to create uniform modern subjects and individual desires to explore diverse personal identities. On one hand, waste symbolized the vulnerabilities of the Chinese state and its people, representing anything or anyone that contributed to the nation's weakness—from low-quality municipal garbage and unsanitary living conditions to wartime enemies. On the other hand, waste served as material and creative inspiration, helping people navigate modern

life and pursue interests and desires suppressed by the nationalist narrative. The stories about waste examined in this chapter shed light on the everyday lives and struggles of artists, entertainment writers, melancholic lovers, daydreamers, coolies, and strikers—figures crucial to shaping modern Chinese identities but often overlooked and forgotten in history.

While this chapter has explored the link between waste and the construction of modern identities, it has not looked into how gender complicates this relationship, even though many of the stories discussed above reveal both implicit and explicit gender dynamics. What gender dynamics come through in historical narratives about waste? How did gender influence people's writings and actions as they sought alternative identities and resistance through waste? Why is gender important for understanding the cultural history of waste? I will discuss these questions in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2.
Gendered Resistance

The story of painter Li Qingping (李青萍) using waste from dumps to create art as a form of resistance against the political oppression she endured from the 1950s to the 1970s (see the end of Chapter 1) has another side to it. Though Li did not explicitly address gender issues in her works, she became an early advocate for women's rights and independence, being the first woman in her hometown to wear short hair at the age of fifteen (Chen, 2017). During the tough years when she was homeless, surviving by scavenging and dismissed by most as a 'crazy old bag,' she received help from neighborhood housewives and nuns at the temples (Chen, 2017). This experience, as she later remembered, 'gave her the courage to keep painting and living' (Chen, 2017).

Li's case shows that stories about waste are never gender-neutral, even if they sometimes seem that way at first glance. As Chapter 1 demonstrates, waste served as a source of material and creative inspiration, helping people resist social inequality and political oppression while exploring various identities. However, much like Li, whose struggle for artistic freedom was closely tied to her advocacy for female empowerment, the pursuit and expression of desires and emotions through waste have always been implicated in the formation of one's gender identity. For instance, while both male and female writers referred to their own works as 'waste' to deflect criticism, male writers approached it with a playful attitude, showcasing confidence in their writing, whereas female writers tended to express bitterness, reluctance, and anger about this way of 'self-deprecation.' Gendered experiences and consciousness imbued waste with different meanings for different people, while also making it a site where gender roles and dynamics were negotiated and redefined.

This chapter expands on Chapter 1 by exploring how waste inspired narratives and actions that challenged established gender norms throughout the twentieth century. As Lisa

Rofel (1999) suggests, gender refers to 'contingent, nonfoundational differentiations of femininity and masculinity that are mapped onto social relations and bodies, defining the nexus of power/knowledge that permeates social life' (p. 4). That is to say, in our discussions of modern societies and cultures, gender should not be viewed as an additional factor or a 'niche' perspective to consider; instead, it plays a formative role in shaping power dynamics and in influencing how we understand modernity. As a result, when examining how waste comes to represent different forms of modernity for different people, I do not treat gender as simply one category among others—like nationality, political affiliation, class, or age —but as an intrinsic and constitutive element, shaped through and embedded within the knowledge and practices surrounding waste.

This chapter also reflects on how women's emotions and their everyday experiences of modern life were often framed as 'waste' in cultural narratives. In her 1981 keynote speech, 'The uses of anger: women responding to racism,' American feminist writer Audre Lorde states:

> Everything can be used, except what is wasteful. You will need to remember this, when you are accused of destruction.
>
> Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. And when I speak of change, I do not mean a simple switch of positions or a temporary lessening of tensions, nor the ability to smile or feel good. I am speaking of a basic and radical alteration in all those assumptions underlining our lives (Lorde, 1987).

Lorde's statement resonates with the strategic deployment of emotions seen in the literary and historical texts analyzed in Chapter 1. Like the rage of the women of Color, the expression of personal feelings and desires was often deemed as useless and disruptive within the predominant narratives about nation-building in Republican and Socialist China. However, as demonstrated in Chapter 1, writers of that time tactically employed the concept of waste to push back against how their works about melancholic romance, leisurely pursuits,

and aspirations for bourgeois lifestyles were dismissed as 'waste.' Those emotions, though denounced and oppressed by the mainstream society, were useful for people in the past to explore their identities and continue to be instrumental for us in understanding the multifacetedness of modernity. In other words, by serving as a platform for the expression of repressed emotions, the notion of waste mobilized a different imagination about the self and society.

This chapter employs the concept of the 'qualisign' to explore how waste is intertwined with gendered experiences of modernity. According to C. Peirce (1998), a qualisign is a 'quality which is a sign,' but it 'cannot actually act as a sign until it is embodied' (p. 291). Building on this, waste can be seen as a qualisign in that the quality of 'being waste' gains additional meanings when embodied through people, objects, language, and other tangible forms. In Lorde's (1987) speech, the notion of 'wastefulness' is closely tied to the stereotype of angry Black women, who have long been unfairly portrayed by racist and patriarchal systems as 'dangerous' and 'threatening.' When this biased association is repeatedly reinforced and perpetuated through various forms of media representation, it creates new processes of meaning-making that affect the perception of the original signs. Therefore, in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s, waste became not only a qualisign of discarded objects such as garbage, debris, or refuse, but also of black women and other racial and gender minorities. Meanwhile, the meanings assigned to these groups—regarding their bodies, sexualities, and feelings—are branded as dirty, disposable, and useless. This chapter focuses on some of the parallels between Lorde's portrayal of angry Black American women and the representation of 'sexual' and 'emotional' women in the works of Chinese female writers. By examining how waste functions as a qualisign of women's desires and affection in those works, I argue that it simultaneously serves as a symbol of women's oppression and a catalyst for their awakening and resistance.

In this chapter, I draw on my personal experiences and observations of waste-related practices during fieldwork and position them in dialogue with my textual analysis to unravel the metaphorical meanings of dumping and recycling in cultural representations. In the works discussed in this chapter, the waste dump often symbolizes a space where women's writings, reading materials, stories, and memories are both discarded and, simultaneously, rediscovered and reclaimed. During my research trip, I wandered through Xiamen and Shanghai, searching for works buried in the 'repositories of old books and back issues' in quiet library corners, and among the stacks of 'soon-to-be removed' materials in second-hand bookshops. The messiness and dustiness of the environment where they were stored, and the treacherousness of my journey to acquire them, mirrored the arduous recycling processes depicted within the pages. Just as the authors repurpose the discarded narratives to restore voice to silenced women in their works, I engage with these texts to explore some of the overlooked aspects within our everyday discourse on waste. As I interweave my reading of these texts into everyday activities, I realize that the concept of the waste dump is continually created through language, imagery, and other symbolic social signs of gender. Similarly, the gendering of everyday waste sites—like the urban waste stations —is evident not just in how labor is divided, but also in daily conversations and interactions. They are, much like the ones described in the literary texts, sites of gender negotiation.

In addition to arguing that the dump is a gendered space, I contend that picking waste from it, both in a literal and symbolic sense, is an act of performing gender. Gender, according to Judith Butler (1990), is 'a corporeal style, an "act"…that one does' (p. 272), which suggests that an individual's sense of gender identity is constructed through the bodily performance of social conventions and norms. By emphasizing the constructed nature of gender, Butler aims to fight for the marginalized identities that defy the artificial and rigidly imposed rules of normative heterosexuality. Butler's theory elucidates how the characters in

the literary works analyzed by this chapter are forced into their state of 'wastedness' through systems of signs and conventions that dictate society's perception of value. People excluded by these systems—such as women—are seen as unnecessary or excessive, and their stories have been marginalized in dominant narratives of modernization, which prioritize male experiences. Through my embodied experience of 'ragpicking,' this chapter excavates and presents these stories to challenge the norms that decide who deserves attention in everyday life and what is considered 'valuable' in the study of modern Chinese culture.

In search of the missing women

Like any type of knowledge, producing and disseminating information about waste is an exercise of power. As Foucault (1995) famously argues, the formation of a discursive field of knowledge is influenced by the power structures of society, and, in turn, knowledge is used by those in power to maintain and exercise control over others. The discourse surrounding waste, as demonstrated in chapter 1, was largely created and controlled by the socio-economic elites, including politicians, Party members, government officials, writers, editors, and journalists, to advocate for or oppose various social policies and nation-building initiatives based on their own perspectives and interests. Moreover, although there existed multiple interpretations of waste, each representing distinct identities and social positions, they were inevitably shaped by power structures that favored male, heterosexual dominance. This hetero-male-centeredness, which underlies the construction of modernity (Felski, 1995), has resulted in the erasure of women and other gender minorities from the narratives about waste. In order to comprehend how the resources discussed in this chapter can challenge male-heteronormativity, it is crucial to begin by exploring how and why women become absent in the production of waste-related knowledge and archives.

First, the concept of 'hygienic modernity,' which has given rise to various interpretations of waste as an impediment to a strong, healthy nation, is driven by a totalizing logic of patriarchal domination. In Ruth Rogaski's (2004) accounts of the creation of hierarchical distinctions between 'the hygienic' and 'the unhygienic' in Republican China, she uses gendered images found in advertisements to illustrate that the ideal hygienic citizen was portrayed as 'the male head of a traditional multigenerational family' (p. 228). This pattern is also pervasive in public discussions and representations regarding waste, where what constitutes 'waste' extends beyond being simply dirty or worthless to also being divergent from the image of that 'ideal hygienic male.' For example, in a 1946 feature article published in the magazine *Shanghai Closeup* (*Shanghai Texie*; 上海特寫), the author compares ballrooms in Shanghai to 'waste bins' and dance hostesses to 'waste' who 'carry poison in their bodies, much like venomous snakes, bewitchingly consuming the hearts of their clients' (Lu, 1946, p. 2). The article then moves on to celebrate the government's proposal to shut down all the ballrooms to 'refresh the air of Shanghai' (Lu, 1946, p. 2). Rather than addressing the underlying social and political issues that forced many women to take up this profession, the article blames the dance hostesses for causing harm to men's families and health, while cautioning against 'the danger of streets covered by waste after the waste bins are torn down' (Lu, 1946, p. 2).[10] This way of denouncing women as waste, particularly those who deviated from the 'good wife, wise mother" role or were perceived as threats to the patrilineal family system, echoes the advertisements discussed by Rogaski (2004), which depict young women using foreign disinfectant to sanitize themselves in order to distance themselves from 'the unhygienic sexuality of the prostitute' (p. 232). As most writings about waste in the Republican era aimed to raise awareness of personal and public hygiene, they highlight two archetypal female characters to underscore their purposes: the

[10] For more about the history of social dancing in Republican Shanghai, refer to Field (2010).

clean and healthy housewife who held a pivotal role in managing household waste and thus contributed to the nation's modernization project, and the 'unhygienic' dance hostesses or prostitutes who were considered as sources of pollution and moral decay. Both types of characters, however, were subsumed under the male-dominated ideal of 'hygienic modernity,' with women only being included in it when adopting the roles assigned by men.

The perpetuation of such stereotypes about women thus led to the suppression of women's voices and experiences within the narrative of waste. The rhetoric wherein men dictate the definition of waste, while women are relegated to a passive role of awaiting classification, recurs in various forms of literature, including some with feminist consciousness. In Xiao Hong's (蕭紅) novels *Field of life and death* (*Sheng si chang*; 生死場)and *Market street* (*Shang shi jie*; 商市街), for instance, women are labeled as 'trash' if they are not actively engaged in household responsibilities, while men become 'garbage' when their disability prevents them from participating in the armed uprisings against the Japanese occupation (Jortay, 2022, p. 15). Although both novels critique the discourse on human rubbish (Jortay, 2022, p. 15), they do not delve deeper into questioning the underlying representational paradigm that categorized women and men with physical impairments as waste. Similarly, in stories that feature waste pickers, such as Lao She's (2012) *Four generations under one roof* (四世同堂), men hold the authority to traverse the city, salvaging potentially valuable items, whereas women are depicted as staying at home, awaiting the return of men with money or food. As these examples indicate, many representations of waste in modern China were shaped by the preoccupations of masculine fantasy of modernity, which, on most occasions, did not include women's experiences.

Another reason I posit for the lack of female presence in waste-related cultural products is linked to the rejection of female bodies and sexualities in public discussions around modernization. As demonstrated by prior analyses, waste as an embodied practice was

closely connected to one's intimate life, encompassing their sexual experiences. This is why the metaphor of waste was frequently used in depictions of love affairs, sexual fantasies, and erotic narratives (see Chapter 1). In an era of intense nationalism and rapid state-building, waste offered a way for people to express their desires and personal identities. However, when perusing the archives, it became apparent to me that most works concerning waste and sexualities were created by men who either employed waste as a literary trope to convey male experiences or succumbed to the tendency of portraying women as 'waste.' One key reason, as Frank Dikötter (1995) suggests, is that the elites in Republican China believed that 'the proper control of sexual desire was the key to restoring the strength of the nation and achieving modernity' (p. 2). That is to say, sexual behaviors should be strictly disciplined within marriage and family institutions in order to cultivate a healthier population and contribute to national revival. Although women in the early twentieth century received unprecedented emancipation in terms of personal freedom and social status, their bodies remained tightly regulated as 'the patriarchally-oriented order gave way to a nationally-focused power structure' (Zhang, 2018, p. 405). Since reproduction takes place within the female body, the regulation of women's sexuality was viewed as natural, scientific, and even progressive, serving the goal of producing healthier future generations. As a result, while male writers could strategically frame their sexual identities and experiences through the metaphor of waste, female writers faced greater obstacles —not only because waste was often associated with the degradation of women, but also because discussions of female sexuality were seen as socially transgressive.

Within this context, Liang Renlan's (梁紉蘭) 1931 short story *Documents from the waste bin* (*Lajixiang zhong de wenjian*; 垃圾箱中的文件) can be seen as an endeavor to challenge the invisibility of women and to construct a novel interpretation of the concept of waste. Published in a magazine named *Equality* (*Pingdeng Zazhi*; 平等雜誌), the story

recounts the tragic experience of a young woman who is coerced by her mother into working as a nude model to support their family. The story unfolds in the form of the protagonist's diary, meticulously documenting her complex feelings about her bodies and sexuality, her hope and desperation in life, and her contemplation of gender and the society. At first glance, the narrative adopts the *guixiu* (cultivated gentlewomen from the inner chamber; 闺秀) style, a literary culture of women that originated during the Ming-Qing period (late sixteenth century). Historically, women were confined to the inner/domestic sphere and discouraged from participating in literary practices. Nevertheless, starting from the late Ming Dynasty, educated women from noble families gathered together to compose poetry and curate collections and anthologies of women's poems. This tradition, however, faced criticism in the twentieth century, as its focus on lyricism and sentimentalism was perceived to be in conflict with the modern reformist agenda (Li, 2023). Many female writers, under this circumstance, '[learned] to give up their own desires in exchange for social place' (Chow, 1988, p. 75), which means that they deliberately avoided themes of female desires and emotions in their works, with the intention of rendering their writing 'less feminine' and more conducive to acceptance by the new literary culture. Liang's story, on the contrary, disrupts such dichotomy between so-called 'feminine texts' and the masculine emphasis on realism and literature as a tool for revolution. Narrated through the voice of a young woman from the lower class, whose father dies of poverty and whose mother has no choice but to 'sell' her to the owner of a painting studio, the story deviates from the *guixiu* tradition of portraying women from wealthy families. In doing so, it embraces the tendency to expose the darkness of Chinese realities. On the other hand, Liang's story adheres to the *guixiu* style by exploring the protagonist's internal psyche. Rather than simply depicting the protagonist's pain and sadness— emotions often associated with lower-class women in realist literature—the story

explores her rich inner world, including curiosity about her body, sexual fantasies, and thoughts about life beyond her own circumstances.

It is through the nuanced portrayal of the protagonist's complex and multi-faceted inner world that the story challenges the stereotype of women as 'waste.' Young and educated, the protagonist feels ashamed of working as a nude model, even as she tries to convince herself that it is just a job. This is primarily because, as with society's perception of dance hostesses mentioned earlier, nude models were regarded as disgraceful. The protagonist records her feelings after her initial days at work as follows:

> An entire room filled with men, all glaring at me as if I were their enemy. Zhang [the middle man who introduced the job] had assured mom that everyone is well-educated and would be respectful. Now I see the truth behind his lies. The men were rude—some even had disheveled hair. One of them wore blush on his cheeks. Who would believe he was a man? They pointed at my breasts, making loud remarks and laughing. I must tell mom that I would rather die than return there (Liang, 1931, p. 5).
> [...]
>
> I asked my friend Yinzi to go with me, hoping her accompany would give me some courage and make me feel less ashamed. But this 'bitch' was just as bad as others. She said, 'This kind of thing is even more despicable than being a waitress in a tea house. To be naked in front of people…how utterly shameful!' (Liang, 1931, p. 3)

The reactions the protagonist receives reveal that the naked female body was viewed not only as corrupting and a threat to the ideal of the 'good wife and wise mother,' but also as a marker of a 'non-human' status—one that left nude models vulnerable to abuse and abandonment. As Susan Mann (2011) points out, in Chinese medical understanding, the body's boundaries—the skin—were seen as 'permeable to the larger circulation of cosmic energy that surrounded it' (p. 95); consequently, the demarcation of an individual was defined by his or her clothes. The clothed body represented humanity and 'signaled gender, age, ethnicity, and status' (Mann, 2011, p. 95). Stripped off her clothes, the nude model thus forfeits its human status and becomes an object that embodies moral deprecation.

Although the protagonist cannot escape being objectified by society, she resists it by valuing and affirming love for her own body. While she detests exposing her body to the men in the painting studio, she does not see her nudity as inherently shameful —the shame stems from being judged and mocked by those men. Instead, when alone, she is curious about her own body and takes every feeling it has seriously. At one point, she holds her younger sister close against her body, and the baby begins to playfully touch her breasts. Instead of getting angry, she blushes and get confused. She writes in a gentle, joyful tone,

> This sensation was so pleasurable, to the extent that words eluded me. Comfort unfurled from the tip of my heart, spreading its embrace throughout my entire being. My body took on a gentle suppleness, a dewy sheen of sweat forming. Such feeling lingered for a while before I finally came to myself— how weird and puzzling, isn't it? (Liang, 1931, p. 9)

For the protagonist, the naked body transforms into a site of protest against the social environment that has relegated it to sacrifice and dehumanization. Her body is no longer an object exploited for profit, nor is it a source of humiliation that makes her feel like 'waste.' Rather, it becomes the site where she first discovers the joy of asserting control over herself. Although she is shy—and tries to hide her enjoyment by constantly saying that these experiences are confusing— she acknowledges and embraces her desire. Instead of viewing her desire as shameful, she seeks to satisfy it by tightly hugging her sisters, her mother, and even pillows and quilts, describing these moments as 'quite interesting experiments' (Liang, 1931, p. 9).

The story's challenge to the notion of women as 'waste' is also reflected in the protagonist's attitudes toward other women. When her friend Yinzi —the one who once ridiculed her for her job—reveals that her own mother sold her to a brothel, the protagonist does not retaliate. Instead, she feels a deep sadness. Yinzi is now looked down on by all the neighbors, and when she stops by the protagonist's home, the protagonist's mother quickly looks for an excuse to send her away, saying that being seen with Yinzi could damage their

reputation. Hearing this, the protagonist protests, 'Reputation? What does that even mean? What did Yinzi do wrong? The first to blame is her father [...] then her mother [...] They are the ones who threw her into the mire' (Liang, 1931, p. 24). She also rejects the idea that women should see themselves as 'waste,' even though society has long been indoctrinating them to believe so. Not long after the protagonist starts working at the studio, the middleman who arranged the job comes to their house and rapes her mother, claiming he is owed something in return for his help. The mother breaks down after the assault. Instead of blaming the middleman, she prays to divine beings to forgive the 'immoral act' and her own body, which she now believes is 'dirty and can never be made clean' (Liang, 1931, p. 17). Seeing this, the protagonist feels helpless. Though she cannot change her mother's mindset or behavior, she writes in her diary: 'Kneeling and praying won't change anything—we need to be stronger; we need to value ourselves' (Liang, 1931, p. 17).

One way the protagonist reclaims her self-worth is by embracing the female gaze, presenting it as a challenge to the male gaze that dominates both the painting studio and broader society. As the story progresses, the protagonist no longer focuses on her feelings of shame and discomfort under the judgmental eyes of the men in the studio. Instead, she turns the gaze back on the men, becoming the one who judges. While she sits before the men, she observes them closely, filled with contempt as she wonders how they can be so 'ugly and stupid' (Liang, 1931, p. 14). After each session, she stays behind in the studio to see what they have painted. While she dismisses most of the portraits with a sneer— 'They call this painting? What a joke!' —she feels 'a sense of satisfaction' when she comes across one portrait of a naked man (Liang, 1931, p. 14). Unlike her mother, who even considers looking at men—let alone naked men—immoral, the protagonist openly expresses her delight, repeating several times in her diary: 'A naked man!' (Liang, 1931, p. 14). Her delight can be read both as a reversal of the male gaze and as an affirmation of the female gaze. Susan R.

Bowers (1990) interprets Medusa—a goddess in Greek mythology who turns people to stone with her gaze—as a symbol of female subjectivity expressed through the female gaze. As Bowers (1990) points out, Medusa's power represents female authority and women's wisdom, yet for a long time, 'patriarchal males have had to make Medusa—and by extension, all women—the object of the male gaze as a protection against being objectified themselves by Medusa's female gaze' (p. 220). Similarly, modern Chinese novels—established by male elite intellectuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a narrative form for transforming minds and driving social progress (Liang, 1902, p. 24)—have largely denied women the power of the gaze. The focus on the novel's role in education and modernization led to a preference for certain narratives and character types, such as women depicted as awaiting enlightenment and reform. As a result, even when women writers expressed feminist ideas or engaged with social issues in the novel, their 'gaze' was often turned toward themselves—as expected within the patriarchal framework that positioned women as objects to be examined—rather than directed at men. In Liang's story, the protagonist's enjoyment in viewing and judging the male body therefore challenges the conventional depiction of women as spectacles to be objectified and viewed.

The shift from the male gaze to female gaze runs parallel to the subversion from waste to valuables in the story. Although on the surface the story ends with the protagonist's decision to commit suicide—echoing the typical marriage/death/madness endings found in many female-centered modern novels (Duplessis, 1985, p. xi)—the author disrupts this ending through a circular narrative structure. As the story nears its end, the protagonist's mother trades her to an aging veteran as a concubine. After desperately trying—and failing—to escape the fate forced upon her, the protagonist writes in her final diary entry:

> Alright. With these words now penned, my life is over. All I need to do is to drink up this dark elixir before me, and the land of death shall await. Finished! Concluded! My life! (Liang, 1931, p. 29)

The story concludes here, leaving the reader to wonder about the protagonist's fate. However, since the story follows a circular structure, ending where it began, the reader already knows from the outset that the protagonist has likely died and that her diary ultimately ends up discarded in a waste bin. The opening is as follows:

> The unusual documents you are about to read were discovered by me in a waste bin. I made no alterations to them, but merely reorganized the order of each piece (Liang, 1931, p. 1).

With the 'I' in the opening paragraph referring to Liang, she indicates that it is her, a woman, who rescues the story of another woman from being dumped. This stands in contrast to the cultural norm that typically designates men as the ones who have the power to determine what should be waste and what should be recycled. That which the patriarchy knowledge system deems worthless—women's desires and sexualities—attains value through Liang's story, while male bodies, men's quests for reputation and elevated social position, and other aspects favored by the system, is ridiculed, and criticized. Waste, in this way, acts as a site for female resistance.

By challenging the hetero-male-centric narrative surrounding waste and proposing a feminist perspective on waste and recycling, Liang's story serves as a historical echo of later works from the socialist and post-socialist periods that confront the erasure of female voices and perspectives in representations of waste. In the People's Republic of China, public discourse on waste has continued to be shaped by modernization narratives rooted in patriarchal viewpoints. Despite variations in how women are portrayed in socialist and post-socialist representations of waste, they continue to be objectified and rendered easily 'disposable.' In the following section, I will draw on Peng Xiaolian's (彭小莲) short story *Memory of Paris* (*Bali de huiyi*; 巴黎的回忆) and Li Yingzi's (李樱子) novel *Waste people* (*Laji ren*; 垃圾人) to demonstrate how the theme of waste reflects embodied, gendered experiences and creates space for marginalized voices and identities to be heard.

‘The dump’ as gendered space

One notable common characteristic between writings about waste in the Republican period and the post-1949 days is the marginalization of female knowledge and experiences. Although female figures continue to feature in fiction, cinema, and everyday imagery about waste, they remain bound by norms that often subordinate the gender issue to other social forces. As Tani Barlow (1988) notes, ‘privileging gender is itself a tactic’ (p. 12) —a tactic that must be used deliberately and with sustained effort if women are to engage in public debate and assert their distinct identities from men. Yet as I argued earlier, gender does not function merely as a strategy or an auxiliary element; instead, it compels through the shaping of narratives about waste. Socially constructed, these narratives are inherently gendered, but are rendered ‘un-gendered’ by a set of normative frames that perpetuate the oppression of specific groups, such as the dance hostesses and nude models analyzed in preceding section. This section continues to dismantle the hegemonic norms, and to reveal the gendered nature of the narratives concerning waste.

Diverging from the Republican era when women were portrayed either as victims of a state prone to being ‘wasted’ by the modern world, or as ‘waste’ themselves polluting the health of the society, Socialist China crafted an iconic image of female proletarian workers who played a pivotal role in the nationwide hygienic movement. As illustrated in the poster below, women cleaners were frequently depicted in newspapers and were a familiar presence in everyday life. The woman in the foreground of the poster, wearing a white cap that symbolizes her identity as a worker, holding a broom while rolling up her sleeves, looks happy and ready to take part in the cleaning campaign against waste, pests, bacteria, and other contaminants. While the image of the robust and energetic female worker challenges the conceptualization of public hygiene as a male-led domain, it at the same time erases individual traits by reconfiguring female bodies to meet masculine norms. As Tina Mai Chen

(2003) suggests, in socialist iconography, the male proletariat 'occupied a secure location,' whereas women were required to use masculinized clothing and body to assert their identities, social space, and activities (p. 375). To a large extent, the inclusion of women in various public discourses, including waste, was an object of the Party policies and ideology, and its impact on representing women's multiple subjectivities was limited.

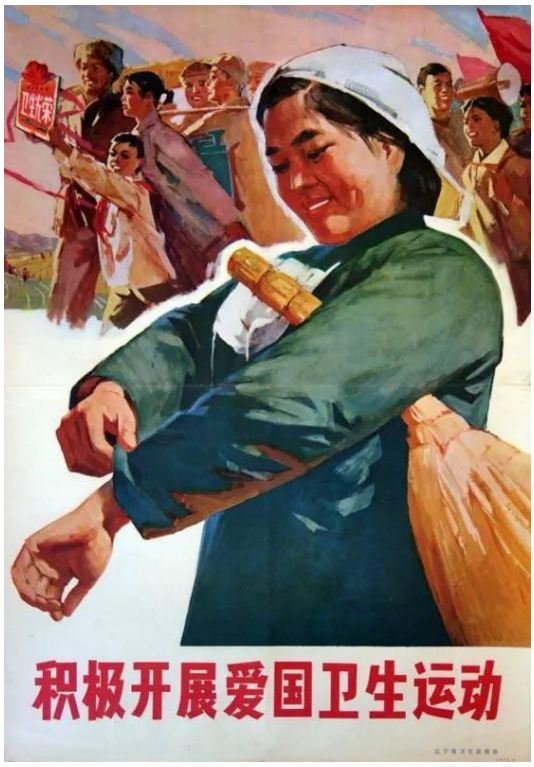

Figure 3. Poster promoting the Patriotic Hygiene Campaigns. The caption reads, 'Enthusiastically engage in the Patriotic Hygiene Campaigns.' Available at: https://www.sohu.com/a/554847643_120500948 (Accessed 5 August 2023).

Literary works from the period similarly portrayed women as icons devoid of individuality. In Luo Binji's (骆宾基) novel *A recycling station in the mountain region* (*Shanqu shougouzhan*; 山区收购站), Cao Ying, the head of the station, is described as follows:

> She wears a flat cap with its peak pointed sharply toward the sky. Tall and sturdy, with long, strong legs, she is dressed in a blue uniform and carries a large backpack, making her indistinguishable from a man. The only hint that she is a woman is the blue handkerchief tied around her neck (Luo, 1961, p. 243).

Cao Ying is not the only character in the novel whose appearance Luo describes as masculine. In fact, all the female characters, from young girls to middle-aged women, are presented in the same way. However, even though the main plot centers on Cao leading local women to successfully recycle materials, the story is told from the perspectives of men—first, an experienced staff member who has worked at the recycling station longer than Cao, and second, a young technician. This narrative structure creates a paradox: on one hand, the female body is stripped of its femininity; on the other, it is—albeit subtly—sexualized through the gaze of the male narrators. Despite Cao's masculine appearance, she is described as possessing 'a certain tenderness that especially belongs to young women [...] and a pair of black eyes with long eyelashes that make her look very pretty and attractive' (Luo, 1961, p. 243). Women are therefore objectified on two levels—both as ideological constructs and as projections of patriarchal fantasy.

Beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as China gradually transitioned from a planned economy to a market economy, the image of the masculinized proletarian worker slowly gave way to what I refer to as 'ungendered labor.' In Jennifer Baichwal's (2006) documentary film *Manufactured landscapes*, she and photographer Edward Burtynsky showcase the vast landscapes of factories, mines, shipyards, and dams built by the Chinese as they set forth on the journey to earn the title of the 'Factory of the world.' The camera captures hundreds of thousands of workers amid buildings and machines, all dressed in identical uniforms that make it impossible for the audience to distinguish their gender or age. This portrayal of workers as a collective labor force—a 'manufactured landscape' stripped of personal identities—is also evident in many post-socialist Chinese artworks focused on

waste. For instance, in artist Li Jikai's (李继开; 2014) acrylics series *Waste picker* (*Shihuangzhe*; 拾荒者), all the characters share an identical blank, numb face of a little boy who was featured in several of Li's earlier works. The boy's face is transposed onto a variety of bodies—naked, clothed, wounded, distorted, healthy, and exhausted—that nevertheless possess no gender characteristics. The replacement of the waste pickers' original faces with the boy's face, on the one hand, can be understood as Li's expression of empathy towards them. In an interview, he noted that urbanization led to an influx of migrants from rural and underdeveloped regions, many of whom worked as garbage gleaners and recyclable collectors. Through their labor, these migrant collectors reshaped the urban landscapes, evoking within him a complex blend of emotions that 'evolved gradually… encompassing shock, compassion, and melancholia' (Teng and Li, 2016). Through the boy's visage as a representation, Li conveys their fragility, innocence, and plight. On the other hand, the monotonous, dull facial expressions, as well as the contorted bodies, reveals Li's reluctance to perceive the dump as a gendered space inhabited by humans. Without their identities, the waste pickers epitomize an intricate, indescribable amalgamation of objecthood and personhood.

In contrast to these portrayals that present the dump as a gender-neutral space —either as social critique or as a way to sidestep gender issues— both Peng Xiaolian's story *Memory of Paris* and Li Yingzi's novel *Waste people* focus on the voices and embodied experiences of the women who live and work there. While 'the dump' represents different social and historical settings in the works of Peng and Li, it is where gender norms are unsettled and reshaped through evolving relationships. By highlighting women who defy social norms and assert their subjectivity, Peng and Li's works reimagine 'the dump' as a site of gender resistance.

Though published in 1992, Peng's story begins with the protagonist A'mi's memory of her childhood experiences in the 1960s. That was at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, a sociopolitical upheaval that later brought widespread violence, destroyed cultural heritage, and disrupted education. In the story, the residents of A'mi's neighborhood disposed of books, paintings, and virtually all printed materials out of fear of being labeled anti-revolutionary. The discarded books were piled in a recycling station—'a very small, dark room' (Peng, 1992, p. 51)—on a street corner, mixed with other household and municipal waste. While the adults in the neighborhood tried to avoid any connection to the printed materials, the children would often sneak over to the recycling station to 'steal' them. However, this activity was reserved for boys, as it demanded 'speed, bravery, and fearlessness' (Peng, 1992, p. 51)—qualities stereotypically attributed to boys. As a result, girls who wished to read had to rely on borrowing books from the boys.

A'mi's first act of defiance was breaking this unspoken rule by joining the boys on their trips to the recycling station. The boys mocked her and warned that if the station guard caught them, she was on her own. A'mi was determined to go, and when she got there, she tried her best to gather as many books as she could. Unfortunately, without the boys' help, A'mi was caught and ended up with nothing but a few pages she had torn from a picture book. Even though she did not understand what was on the pages, A'mi kept them as a reminder of that failed mission, which left a scar near her eye from a wound she got while running from the guard. After her first attempt, A'mi returned to the recycling station more carefully and managed to get some books. Gradually, more girls joined her, and taking books out from the recycling station—transforming them from waste into treasures—was no longer something only boys did.

Although the story of the 'dump' ends here as the reader is pulled from A'mi's memory back to a more recent time—thirty years later—the recycling station continues to

reappear as A'mi searches for what she truly wants. Now in Paris, she still keeps the torn pages from the picture book that show a sunrise over the Seine. To her, the pages—once discarded as waste—act as a bridge connecting her past and present. At a coffee shop, A'mi meets a French woman, and after some flirtatious conversation, she invites A'mi to her apartment. A'mi hesitates at first, but when she absentmindedly touches the scar on her eyelid, she feels the same 'sense of curiosity' (Peng, 1992, p. 53) that once led her to the recycling station. In the end, despite being married, she goes with the woman to her apartment, where the woman begins to make romantic advances.

A'mi's rebellion—first against the boys' control of the recycling station, and later against what she calls 'the traditional rules' that expect women to marry men by a certain age (Peng, 1992, p. 53) —shows how claiming the right to recycle, and to define what is waste, allows women to challenge broader gender oppression. Although at the last moment, A'mi turns down the French woman and leaves her apartment, it is not because she feels tied to patrilineal marriage or moral expectations, but because she realizes she still has not discovered who she truly is. As she wanders the streets, she contemplates:

> It's always been like this, ever since I was a child—getting into relationships, getting married... just because people said, 'it's time,' because I'm a woman, because everyone else was doing it, so I did too. But do I really want this? Do I want this family? I'm not sure (Peng, 1992, p. 53).

By featuring A'mi's exploration of her gender identity, Peng challenges and redefines the conceptual connection between waste and gender. Women's desires are no longer treated as 'waste'—things to be ashamed of or considered worthless. Instead, they are shown as vibrant and hopeful. The torn pages can be interpreted as a reflection of A'mi's desires and her evolving sense of self. In the beginning, they represent the unknown—something vague and mysterious that stirs her curiosity and gives her something to long for. As A'mi gradually discovers who she is and what kind of life she truly wants, the meaning of the pages becomes

clearer. In the end, when she decides to return to the French woman's apartment, she looks at the pages again and finds them 'ever beautiful.' They now carry a new purpose for her: 'to chase what she really wants, be loyal to it, and embrace it' (Peng, 1992, p. 53).

Peng's story also challenges the heteronormative, male-centered narrative of waste by offering a queer perspective. As scholars have pointed out, queerness is often seen as 'non-(re)productive,' and therefore linked to notions of 'excess or waste' (Lambert, 2016, p. 264). While Peng leaves the protagonist's gender identity ambiguous, her story questions the traditional value/waste binary, aligning queerness with the former. Similar to Peng's story, Li Yingzi's novel *Waste people* celebrates gender fluidity. In the novel, Li follows the journey of a young woman, Lin Xiaoqing, who, like millions of other Chinese migrants in the 1990s, moves to Beijing in pursuit of her dreams. In her early years in Beijing, Xiaoqing lives in a friend's home near a large landfill on the outskirts of the city, drawn by the low rent. The story unfolds as Xiaoqing navigates interpersonal relationships with other people in the dump, and, through these connections, she gains a deeper understanding of herself. The detailed depiction of these relationships, including Xiaoqing's conflict with her neighbor, an elderly woman who cluttered their yard with recyclables, the break-up of a couple who operate an unlicensed restaurant, and Xiaoqing's one night stand with one of her friends, can be seen as the author's effort to humanize the dump. From the young heroine's point of view, the people inhabiting the dump are 'no different from those living in the skyscrapers of central Beijing' (Li, 2002, p. 45). At the end of the novel, Xiaoqing eventually accrues sufficient money to rent an apartment in the city. However, on her first night in the new apartment, she dreams about the dump. In the dream, she returns to her room in the landfill site, where she describes her experience as 'lying on my bed, gazing at the mountains of refuse that surround. My body entwined with the waste; me and the waste, we shall never be

apart' (Li, 2002, p. 314). In this way, the 'dump' serves as a symbol of home and instills a sense of belonging in Xiaoqing's migration journey.

The boundary between the 'dump'—Xiaoqing's term for her rented room at the landfill site—and the city apartment blurs as Xiaoqing keeps the same lifestyle and continues to hang out with the same group of friends who call themselves the 'waste people' (Li, 2002, p. 140). Among the group, A'Qiang is the most popular—his knowledge of music and fashion makes him the center of attention at the landfill. As a gay man, A'Qiang decided to leave his job and relocate to the landfill after facing workplace discrimination due to his sexuality. Although the living conditions in the 'dump' are worse, he feels 'much more at home,' since even the 'most reserved' aunties accept him without judgment (Li, 2002, p. 136). Another of Xiaoqing's friends, A'Hua, is bisexual. After a failed relationship, he also moved to the landfill, where he gradually develops feelings for A'Qiang. Xiaoqing remains close to both of them, and after moving into the city apartment, she often invites A'Qiang, A'Hua, and other friends from the landfill to visit. They stay up late, openly talking about gender, sexuality, and their personal experiences. They joke, 'In today's China, people like us only belong in the dump—but who knows, maybe someday we'll find the life we've been dreaming of' (Li, 2002, p. 225). In Li's novel, the 'dump' therefore goes beyond a physical space and becomes a symbolic utopia—brought to life through the experiences of gender minorities—where traditional ideas about gender are questioned and broken down.

Conclusion

This chapter delves into the nuances of waste from a gendered perspective. Through an examination of the artistic and literary representation of the perpetual exclusion of the experiences of women and gender minorities, the chapter seeks to critique the inherently male hetero-centric nature of discussions surrounding waste in modern and contemporary China.

As the examples suggest, waste symbolizes an embodied gendered experience that although stigmatizing in some contexts, can also provide a platform for marginalized voices and subjectivities to be expressed.

While Section 1 examines how waste has historically functioned as a trope or metaphor in cultural representations, creating space for public discourse and personal reflection on identity and ways of living amid the changing conditions of modernization, Section 2 shifts attention to how these dynamics play out in everyday life. Drawing on my ethnographic research, it will argue that waste informs people's experiences of modernity not only through texts, but also through embodied and multisensory engagements with governance and mobility, which are embedded with gendered values as well. Focusing primarily on the present while continually referencing the past, Section 2 demonstrates how waste connects ideas and practices from different stages of China's modernization—stages that are sometimes treated as isolated in both contemporary state narratives and academic studies of waste.

Section II.

Unpacking the present

Section introduction

Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, with China entering the 'reform and opening up' era, the way waste is produced, transported, managed, and portrayed in public narratives has changed dramatically. The shift to a market economy and the adoption of an open-door policy for foreign investment brought a surge in consumer goods, in turn leading to a rise in both the quantity and variety of everyday waste. Changes in consumption habits—like moving from using ration coupons for monthly essentials to having an abundance of choices in rapidly expanding department stores and shops—have transformed people's relationship with material goods. In my conversations with urban and rural residents who experienced the sweeping changes at the turn of the century, they all mentioned that, compared to the Socialist era, it is now not only much easier but also guilt-free to buy new products and toss out old ones. The wide use of disposable products has made practices like recycling and frugality —as seen in Zhao Xiangyuan's story in Section 1—feel, at times, unnecessary and socially awkward. Embodying what Lisa Rofel (2007) describes as 'the desiring subject'—the individual who 'operates through sexual, material, and affective self-interest' and is set to 'usher in a new era in China' (p. 3)—people in post-socialist and contemporary times are producing and engaging with waste in ways that more directly reflect their personal needs and longings, rather than out of obligation or necessity.

As the amount and variety of waste grow, the way it moves between regions becomes more complex and multifaceted. In the early 2000s, China became the world's second-largest plastic producer, but this high output still fell short of meeting domestic demand, leading to an increasing need for waste imports (Yoshida, 2005, p. 33). In addition to plastic waste—cheaper than raw materials for producing new plastic—China also imported millions of tons

of recyclable solid waste, e-waste, and non-recyclable waste every year,[11] much of which was processed in illegal coastal workshops and then resold at high prices. Meanwhile, as urban consumption has surged —especially with the explosion of online shopping and meal delivery in recent years—municipal solid waste that cannot be handled within cities is transported to the suburbs and rural areas, where it is dumped in landfills or recycled by informal businesses, such as family-run workshops. While the transfer and informal handling of waste occurred during the Republican and socialist eras, it mostly relied on local labor due to poor transportation infrastructure and government surveillance of population movement (Goldstein, 2021). In the post-socialist period, however, with the labor market opening up and the loosening of the old housing registration system, migrant workers from rural and less developed areas have become the main labor force, working in coastal or suburban workshops, scavenging in cities, and moving between these spaces.[12] Against this backdrop of global trade and domestic migration, mobility has become a central focus in contemporary discussions about waste.

This section first explores how the constant movement of waste creates new forms of mobility and how these various forms of mobility play a key role in shaping Chinese modernity in the post-socialist and contemporary times. Mobility, as many scholars have noted, does not simply occur in and across space and time; rather, it should be understood as a process 'actively shaping or producing multiple, dynamic spaces and times' (Merriman, 2012, p. 1). Mobility is not an outcome of modernity—a concept that would lose its meaning if not temporally and spatially grounded (King, 1995, p. 109) —but is a constitutive part of it. The movement of waste is not new to the post-socialist era, nor is it merely a result of technological advances or changes in economic and political conditions. What is unique is

[11] The data comes from the mid-2000s. See Yoshida (2005).
[12] For more on China's housing registration system, known as *hukou* (户口), and its impact on internal migration, see Fan (2008).

how quickly things turn into waste, how far and fast that waste travels, and how long it lingers—despite its intended disposability. As this section will illustrate, waste moves through complex networks, generating new flows of people and materials, evoking fresh sensations and emotions, reshaping power dynamics—all of which add to the fabric of modern life. These mobilities, demonstrated through both human and non-human actions—such as loudspeakers promoting waste sorting, senior waste workers alternating between roles as 'official employees' and 'informal waste pickers,' and urban youths heading to the countryside to collect waste to relieve stress— transform our perceptions and experiences of post-socialist spaces and time, blurring the lines between past and present, formal and informal, urban and rural.

The focus on mobility leads to another key question explored in this section: how increasing movement of people and materials has complicated the governance of waste. With the historical context provided in Section 1—that waste management has historically been a site of competition and negotiation among various powers—it becomes easier to see how, in the present, these dynamics have grown more complex and involve a broader range of actors. While my analysis of the past relies primarily on historical sources, this section draws on both cultural texts and everyday ethnographic research from urban and rural China. This approach helps to unpack the power dynamics embedded in contemporary narratives and practices around waste, and to better explore how these dynamics may marginalize certain groups, perspectives, and activities.

This section continues to use gender as a major analytical focus, but approaches it through a broader, more intersectional perspective. As Kimberlé Crenshaw (1998) points out, feminist analysis must reject the single-axis framework that view one type of identity or identity formation as the main avenue for understanding discrimination. Intersectionality should not be seen as a tool for categorizing identities, but as a way of investigating how

overlapping systems of oppression operate and interact. As Section 1 shows, gendered inequalities and oppression related to waste have never been limited to women alone, but have also impacted other marginalized groups, including children, underclass coolies, and gender minorities. Moreover, not everyone within these groups has experienced discrimination in the same way. Therefore, this section, and the thesis as a whole, does not center on 'waste and women' specifically, but rather on an intersectional investigation of how waste is entangled with broader systems of social categorization and power.

Chapter 3.

Waste-scape

This chapter opens with an ethnographic glimpse into daily life in Lao Ximen (*Old West Gate*; 老西门), a historic Shanghai neighborhood that has been undergoing redevelopment since 2016. Located in the heart of the metropolis, Lao Ximen was a dense network of alleyways and houses, some dating back over 500 years.[13] While in contemporary usage, the term usually refers to the area roughly spanning between Central Huaihai Road and Lu Jiabang Road, adjacent to the former French Concession (*Bainian Lao Ximen sheying ji*, 2017), historically, it covered a broader region surrounding the west gate of Shanghai's ancient city walls, built in 1553.[14] Having witnessed the evolving urban life of Shanghai and filled with historic architecture, Lao Ximen is regarded as 'the last remaining vestige of Shanghai's Old City' (Chan, 2022).

My personal memories of Lao Ximen come from the stories told by my grandfather, who spent his childhood and adolescent years in the area before enlisting in the army during the second Sino-Japanese war and eventually relocating to the south. In those stories, my grandfather describes Lao Ximen as 'far from neat or orderly,' but always bustling with life, packed with restaurants, street vendors, and flea markets. I remember following him to the places where he had lived, played with friends, and apprenticed at a watch repair shop in the 2000s. The once-crowded streets were a stark contrast to what I saw during my fieldwork in 2023, with most old buildings empty or replaced by new commercial housing and nearly all businesses closed. With construction waste littering the ground, dust swirling in the air, the

[13] For more information on the history of Lao Ximen and the government's renovation project, see https://www.historic-shanghai.com/laoximen-老西门/

[14] In 1913, the city walls were demolished, yet the name 'old west gate' was kept to denote the vicinity.

clamor of construction tools lingering, and recyclers darting through on their motorbikes, the neighborhood that my grandfather had fondly remembered is now like a vast garbage dump in the center of Shanghai.

I met A' Qiang at a construction site while wandering around Lao Ximen. A' Qiang was a construction worker in his thirties whose main task for the day was putting up street posters on a wall that had been recently built to separate the construction site from the part where local residents still lived (Figure 4). Originally from another province, A' Qiang did not know much about the history of Lao Ximen, but after working in the area for years, he had come to realize that it was a place where 'you'd better get away soon.' A' Qiang recalled that in the early days of demolition, tensions often flared between residents unhappy with the renovation project and construction crews who were 'just following orders from above.' However, as more residents moved out of the neighborhood, willingly or not, these conflicts rarely occurred anymore. Gesturing toward an old building, A' Qiang said, 'There's no point complaining to us—we're just the laborers. Honestly, if I were them, I'd take the deal and leave quickly. It's too noisy here every day, and those buildings are cramped and unsafe.' When asked what he thought about the poster he was putting up, which read "Building a civilized city and being civilized citizens,' A' Qiang looked confused. 'Why do you ask me this? I don't care about it. I just do what my boss asked me to do. And after all, no one will look at these. There are only a few people passing by here every day!'

A' Qiang was both right and wrong. The residents I had conversations with mentioned that they were already 'immune to the posters and construction noise.' The area was filled with two types of posters: one urging people to support the government's project and relocate, and the other promoting waste sorting (Figure 5). Next to where I talked with A' Qiang was a waste station that, according to the bulletin board, was set up in 2019, the year Shanghai began its city-wide mandatory waste sorting program (Figure 4). The board showed

that the station was supposed to be open daily from 7:00 to 10:00 a.m., but it was still locked when I got there around 9:30. Later, when I spoke with some residents about the station, they confirmed that it had been abandoned for quite some time. There were two other waste stations in the neighborhood, and although they were not locked, the conditions inside were poor, with bins full of mixed, unsorted trash.

Figure 4. Photo taken in Lao Ximen in March 2023. The man who stood on the ladder is A' Qiang.

Figure 5. Photo taken in Lao Ximen in March 2023. Underneath the poster about waste sorting, the banner reads, 'Enhance people's living conditions, elevate everyone's quality of life.' On the left, the smaller banner reads, 'This area has been expropriated by the government, and the residents have relocated.'

The visible presence of authorities—evident in constant construction noise and propaganda posters—sharply contrasted with the neglect in local upkeep, creating a sense of contradiction in the neighborhood. In a fruit shop where the owner had operated her business for thirty-six years, she remained wary and alert during our conversation, choosing her words with caution. When asked about the neighborhood's changing environment and waste management, the only comment she offered was that she found everything satisfactory. Most residents shared the same attitude —reserved, polite, and silent— when it came to questions about government policies, but they became quite talkative about other topics. In an alleyway a good distance from the construction site where A' Qiang worked, I came across a group of residents in their seventies and eighties sitting in front of their doors, enjoying the sun and chatting with each other. After learning that I was working on a project about waste, they all went back to their homes and brought out some 'waste' items—like a broken clay teapot from someone's great-grandfather, an enamel mug with peeling paint, and a rusty meal box—and shared the stories behind each one. They told me that since the renovation project, Lao Ximen has turned into a temporary gathering spot for recyclers who rent small shops at low prices to store the waste that they collected from around the city. 'But even the recyclers won't take this,' a resident laughed, pointing to her teapot. 'I'll probably move soon and don't have much time left. My kids won't even look at this old stuff. By then, it'll just be real waste.' In the end, they showed me a recycling shop at the corner of the alley that, as they said, was different from the others because it had been there for decades (Figure 6). A loudspeaker hung on the shop door, playing a message on repeat. The voice, probably recorded by the shop owner due to its distinct Shanghainese accent, filled the alleyway, 'Recycling air conditioners, refrigerators, computers, washing machines, water heaters, microwaves, used mobile phones, and electric vehicles...' This voice, together with the advertisements on the wall, the weathered door and windows, and the bustling chatter of the

residents, encapsulated the other side of Lao Ximen's story which, though soon to be discarded, will always get recycled through photographs, recordings, and the sensual memories of its everyday vibrancy.

Figure 6. Photo taken in Lao Ximen in March 2023.

My ethnographic experience in Lao Ximen —a place seen as a symbol of 'waste' in urban planning—reveals that waste and its sensory qualities connect people to various forms of governance, evoke memories, and unveil hidden dimensions of their lives. The many encounters and interactions —between myself, the residents, construction workers, as well as the waste stations, propaganda posters, loudspeakers, and more —have come together to create what I call the 'waste-scape.' Typically, scholars have framed the term as 'landscapes on the margins, wounded spaces, or derelict sites' (Melosi, 2023, p. 44), referring to places like landfills, brownfields, toxic sites, and nuclear wastelands. In this chapter, however, I argue that the 'waste-scape' is more than a physical space defined by waste; it is also an everyday atmosphere generated by waste and experienced through the senses. In Lao Ximen, while most streets in the neighborhood were clean and free of visible waste, the atmosphere

of it was felt through the extensive presence of waste management posters, the sounds of recyclers' tricycles and motorbikes with loudspeakers, the noise from construction sites, and the smell near the abandoned waste stations. The atmosphere also carries a mix of emotions—the residents' hesitance to discuss public affairs, their anxiety about the imminent relocation, nostalgia for the past, and a simmering tension between the residents and those involved in the government's demolition project, such as construction workers and officials. All these sensory experiences and emotions around waste—both literal trash and as a metaphor for the neighborhood destined to be 'thrown away'—form a space where diverse social and political dynamics play out. In this chapter, I will draw on ethnographic moments, using the methods of 'sonic practice' (Hankins and Stevens, 2014), 'visual event' (Bal, 2003), and textual analysis, to show how different 'waste-scapes' reveal distinct forms of waste governance and reshape urban spaces in post-socialist China.

Sensuous governance: a history

Waste often evokes sensuous connotations of smell and sight, yet what was particularly striking about Lao Ximen was the other sensory qualities that layered over these aspects of waste. In particular, the efforts to govern waste added its own sensuous qualities. The methods of 'sonic practice' and 'visual event' provide ways to explore how different sensory layers interact. In *Sound, space and sociality in modern Japan*, Joseph Hankins and Carolyn Stevens (2014) define 'sonic practice' as 'a means of approaching the active, embodied practices involved in making sound meaningful' (p. 2). This includes not only practices that produce, disseminate, and perceive sounds, but also that create contexts where sounds take on meaning and impact. Such emphasis on all aspects of sound, including silence, is embedded in a recent resurgence of the 'anthropology of sound,' which proposes 'an attentive listening to the everyday' through ethnographic fieldwork and views 'sonic

phenomena, textures, and events as social and cultural constructs' (Boudreault-Fournier, 2020, p. 36). Since context is crucial in the anthropological exploration of sound, the 'sonic practice' approach is fundamentally multisensory, involving not only hearing but also sight, smell, touch, and other sensory actions that help shape the context. Similarly, the method of 'visual events' also emphasizes the assemblage of senses, focusing on not merely what is seen, but also 'moments of seeing' (Bal, 2003, p. 9). For Bal (2003), visual studies should encompass 'visuality' itself—how one looks, what emerges from the act of looking, and the places and contexts within which these visual practices take place (p. 11-12). For instance, taking up this approach, Anneke Coppoolse (2016) ventured into the streets of Hong Kong to examine how trash was 'present in a place of presumed tidiness' (p. 149), as captured in the 'visual events' filmed by a trash collector. By understanding the visuality of trash in terms of 'events' rather than mere 'object' or 'spectacle,' Coppoolse (2016) offers a more detailed story 'compiled of certain embodied, sensory, and visual experiences of urban life' (p. 161).

As the ethnography of Lao Ximen shows, combining the methods of 'sonic practice' and 'visual events' helped me explore how waste played a key role in local governance by monitoring people's sensory experiences. As David Howes (2003) notes, sensory experience is not merely physiological and personal; it is 'collectively patterned,' and 'sensual relations are also social relations' (p. xi). Without understanding the shared frustration of Lao Ximen residents —the constant construction noise, dust, and the looming fear of being forced from their homes—it would be hard to see why they, for example, ignored the propaganda posters, stopped fighting with the construction workers, or stayed silent about neighborhood issues like waste management. The production and exchange of 'senses' and sensory knowledge are central to what scholars call 'sensuous governance,' which is anchored in regulatory systems that shape how people feel and behave, aligning them with specific norms (Hamilton, 2020,

p. 2). The governance of Lao Ximen can therefore be seen as primarily centered on constructing an atmosphere of waste, which, at its core, is a form of sensuous governance.

Before proceeding with ethnographic cases to support my argument that waste-related sensuous governance is central to neighborhood governance in post-socialist China, we first need to look back at the Republican and socialist eras, when the link between waste and everyday sensory experiences was widespread in cultural representations. Tracing this history can help us better understand why waste is so important in today's urban governance and how it has been continuously tied to China's modernization processes. In addition, it adds another layer to Section 1, which did not fully explore the sensory aspects of waste in the twentieth century. Furthermore, while most scholars studying visual, auditory, and other sensory cultures in Republican and Socialist China have tended to focus on one of these mediums, my research will show that different sensual practices worked together to reconstruct urban spaces and formulate narratives about waste and modernity.[15]

In the Republican era, unlike today, the 'sounds' of waste came mainly from the voices of people working in public hygiene and waste management. '*Qing dao fu*' (清道夫)—literally translated as 'men who clear the road,' '*la ji fu*' (垃圾夫)—men who carry waste, '*hui shui fu*' (秽水夫)—men who collect and transport swill, and '*fen fu*' (粪夫) — men who transport excrement, played significant roles in shaping the everyday waste practices of urban residents (He, 2016). Employed and supervised by local police offices, these men traversed cities, cleansing main streets and narrow alleys, gathering household waste from doorsteps, and transporting it to designated treatment places using wooden carts and shoulder poles (He, 2016). Their shouts to alert residents of their arrival, mixed with the clattering of carts, buckets, and bins, the swishing of brooms, the splashing of cleansing

[15] Some recent works on visual and auditory culture during the Republican and socialist eras include Tang (2015), Clarke (2019), Landsberger (2020), Kielman (2018), Li (2020), and Tang (2020).

water, and the gurgling sound of waste pouring, constituted the 'soundscape' of Republican Chinese cities. As R. Murray Schafer (1994) notes, 'soundscape' refers to sonic environments, whether actual or constructed, comprising all the sounds heard within. Echoing that, writer Cong Weixi (从维熙) describes the everyday soundscape of Republican Beijing in his memoir essay *In search of the old home: some anecdotes* (*Migu jiqu*; 觅故记趣) as follows:

> I recall that what woke us every morning in our alley was not the crowing of roosters, but rather the dry crunch of the excrement cart's wheels due to a lack of oil. That sound was so piercing that no wonder nearly everyone in old Peking could hum this tune:
>
> 'Excrement cart is our morning rooster,
> With how many sounds coming after,
> In the front door someone's yelling "selling vegetable!",
> In the back door the other' shouting "selling rice!"'
>
> These sounds and voices have left an indelible mark on my childhood memories, which I will always cherish (Cong, 2018, *Migu jiqu*, par. 3).

This depiction shows how the sounds associated with waste created a sense of home by shaping daily routines and everyday activities for people. With the excrement carts and other waste management services arriving at designated times each day, urban residents altered not only their habits of indiscriminate dumping, but also their daily routines and schedules. Hygienic and waste handling practices thus evolved into government-led, collective actions, fostering obligation towards one's residential area—such as the alley in Cong's episode. In the essay, Cong recounts an incident when two mischievous boys removed the stoppers from the buckets used to carry excrement, leading to all the residents in the alley being ordered by a policeman to clean the filth flooded on the ground. The sounds of the excrement cart, the smell of filth, and the feel of the polluted alley ground helped Cong reconnect with his past and community when he returned to the alley seventy years later—now transformed into gated residential compounds in the early 2000s. Lost amidst the 'new straight, wide roads and

tall, crowded buildings,' Cong recognized one of his childhood neighbors—also in his seventies—by hearing him hum the once familiar song of the excrement cart (Cong, 2018, *Migu jiqu*, par. 5-6). For Cong, it was the sensory experiences of waste that connected him to his past, as almost everything else, especially the visual landscape, had changed dramatically.

Sound and imagery interacted to structure urban spaces into a hierarchy. During the Republican era, guidance on waste management and the consequences of disobeying the guidance was disseminated through various mediums, such as street posters (primarily textual rather than pictorial), newspaper reports, magazine articles, and more (He, 2016). These materials, however, required a certain level of literacy to access and comprehend, which limited their reach and effectiveness in areas inhabited by underprivileged people with low literacy levels. In Lao She's (老舍) novel *Four generations under one roof* (*Sishi tongtan*; 四世同堂), for instance, he portrays the contrast between Gulou West Street, one of Beijing's busiest streets, and the crooked, narrow alleys behind it where 'poor people' dwelled (Lao She, 2012, *Four generations*, chap. 2, par. 1). 'These alleys,' as depicted by Lao She, 'are extremely difficult to find. They are so narrow, so long, so dirty, that you wouldn't dare walk in, even if you did find them. Only when you see piles of household waste at their entrances, can you feel a slight sense of relief as you cautiously take a few steps, reassured by the presence of human habitation' (Lao She, 2012, *Four generations*, chap. 2, par. 1). Similarly, He Jiangli's (2016) historical research also indicates that spatial inequalities were perpetuated by varying standards of hygiene across different areas of the cities. When constructing or renovating main roads and alleys inhabited by the upper class, the government dispatched trucks and utilized clean, high-quality earth for paving, whereas the small alleys, like those depicted in Lao She's novel, received only 'dirty earth' or were even completely neglected (He, 2016, chap. 3, sec. 2, par. 3). Moreover, government-employed waste workers seldom visited the 'underclass' areas; and if they did, they sometimes bullied local residents by

‘dumping waste and dirty water collected from other places on the ground’ (He, 2016, chap. 3, sec. 2, par. 5-6). While for Cong Weixi, the sound of the excrement cart, and perhaps the guidance he saw in newspapers about proper dumping habits, formed a special childhood memory, for people who lived in the poor community, the absence of such sounds and images underscored the absence of governance in their area and showed their marginalization within urban spaces.

While the voices of waste workers imposed stratification on Republican urban spaces, the voices of scavengers and recyclers disrupted and broke down this stratification. As Stefan Landsberger (2019) points out, with the collapse of the old imperial system and the continual outbreak of wars, many people—both unemployed urban inhabitants and those fleeing the war-torn countryside—were forced to survive by gleaning and picking waste (p. 32-33). These scavengers, working alone or in self-organized groups, scoured every corner of the cities. Particularly, within the complex chain of waste picking, recycling, reprocessing, and reselling, there were always handfuls of declining aristocratic and scholarly families secretly selling their valuables, hoping to avoid being recognized by those who might know them (Goldstein, 2021, p. 50). Indeed, as Goldstein (2021) puts it, ‘the uneven patchwork of Beijing [and other Republican cities] —geographically (from alleyways to boulevards), socially (from the wealthy to the destitute), and materially (from antique vases to cigarette butts)—was woven together in a web of recycling’ (p. 46). This dismantling is evident in archival footage. In a 1930s video clip, a recycler with shoulder poles is filmed plying his trade in an alley which, suggesting from its neat surroundings, likely belonged to the upper-class. Before the recycler appears on camera, his voice can already be heard echoing through the alley, signaling his arrival (Muyu tandang qingfeng, 2018, 00:10-00:15). As the audience watches this scene, they share the same experience as the alley residents, who, upon hearing the recycler’s call from inside their homes, would gather their recyclables to sell to him.

When the recycler stops in front of a household and starts bargaining with the owner, the owner—wearing a silken *changshan* (Chinese long robe), as opposed to the recycler's short clothes—appears to shy away from the camera, and he quickly heads back into his home once the transaction is completed (Muyu tandang qingfeng, 2018, 00:51-01:20). The owner's awkwardness contrasts with the recycler's confident demeanor, which creates a sense of displacement and contradiction.

Beginning in the 1950s, although the routine calls of waste workers and recyclers remained in the everyday lives of urban residents (Qiu, 2022), mass broadcasts became more and more important in promoting knowledge about hygiene and shaping people's waste practices. As Jie Li (2020) notes, after 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) 'fundamentally revolutionized' the deployment and content of electric sound technologies (p. 28). Before, even though leftist intellectuals and the underground CCP utilized phonographs, radio, and sound cinema to mobilize collective resistance against Japanese and Western imperialism, listening technologies were predominantly employed in popular entertainment and celebrated as symbols of bourgeois culture (Li, 2020, p. 28). In the 1950s, however, with the CCP tightening control over radio and expanding the nationwide reception network, radio served as 'an excellent weapon for large-scale propaganda, education, and agitation' (Li, 2020, p. 30). Nevertheless, owing to the widespread shortage of radio sets across the nation, loudspeakers were employed in railway stations, factories, schools, and other work and residential units to broadcast news, policies, and even entertainment programs originally transmitted by radio (Wang, 2009). Many units also established their own broadcast stations (*guangbo shi*; 广播室) and appointed announcers (*guangbo yuan*; 广播员) to create custom programs and broadcast local matters (Wang, 2009). My grandmother, who worked in a tobacco factory in the 1950s, recalled listening to a range of 'advice on disinfection and waste removal' while rolling cigarettes. She also vividly remembered the monthly 'big cleanup' in

the factory dormitories, when all residents, both adults and children, were engaged in cleaning tasks while simultaneously enjoying patriotic songs played over the loudspeaker. For my grandmother and many in her generation, the 'sound of waste' —along with the smell of disinfectant and the shared pride among neighbors and coworkers in cleaning up—defined the spaces they recognized as 'the collective' (*jiti*; 集体), reinforcing their identity as Socialist citizens contributing to the country's progress.[16]

Rooted in this historical foundation, post-socialist waste management continues to revolve around the practice of sensual governance. However, unlike the socialist period, when shared emotions fueled collective actions to deal with waste, in the post-socialist era, it is the sensory experiences of waste that draw people together. This is mainly due to changes in urban housing and living arrangements. Before the 1978 economic reforms, urban residential spaces were defined by 'the individual and family dependence on the work unit (*danwei*; 单位)' (Tomba, 2014, p. 7), with families like my grandmother's living in neighborhoods managed by their employers. After 1978, and especially since the 1990s, this type of work unit-run neighborhood has been gradually replaced by commercial housing, mostly gated communities, due to the rise of the real estate market, radically transforming the lifestyles of urban Chinese. One major change is that neighborhoods have become much more diverse in residents' identities and backgrounds, making it necessary to rebuild solidarity and shared values for coexistence (Tomba, 2014, p. 12). In the next section, I will present two ethnographic moments —through the concepts of 'sonic practice' and 'visual events'— as well as an analysis of a short story, to illustrate how waste becomes the nexus of neighborhood governance, driving both conflict and connectedness.

[16] For further discussion of the term '*jiti*' and its collectivist values, see Zhu (2021).

Neighborhood as 'waste-scape'

My argument that 'waste-scape' is characterized by the everyday atmosphere formed by waste —experienced through the senses and reflective of different forms of governance— is echoed in Nie Xinsen's (聂鑫森) 1989 short story *Waste* (*Laji*; 垃圾). Narrated from the perspective of a middle-aged writer—presumably Nie himself—the story reveals how waste brings people together and inspires grassroots self-governance during a time of transition. The story begins with the protagonist's unease as he and his family move into a newly refurbished dormitory, once owned by a state-owned enterprise but now sold to the public after the economic reforms. Unlike the socialist period, when neighbors often interacted and shared common spaces like toilets, shower rooms, and playgrounds, housing in the market economy era prioritizes privacy, with each apartment now equipped with its own bathroom and kitchen. As a result, the building is mostly silent, with each family seeming to 'close their door forever,' as everyone 'avoids disturbing others and fears being disturbed' (Nie, 1989, p. 38). As a writer working from home, the protagonist feels a sense of isolation in the silence, until he starts to find comfort in the sound of his neighbors disposing of their waste. Each apartment has a hole in the wall across from the toilet, used to dump waste into an underground 'waste chamber.' All the families in the building are therefore linked through the passage that carries the waste, filling the air with various sounds and smells. Listening to the sounds, the protagonist feels connected to his neighbors, even though he has little contact with them in daily life:

> Every time I heard the sound of someone opening the waste chute, I'd guess who it was based on the direction of the sound. I wondered what they did for a living—maybe someone like me, working from home? Or someone on a night shift with free time in the morning? [...] Over time, I started to recognize what was being thrown away just by the sounds. The clink of beverage bottles and cans was almost musical; beer bottles made a loud 'ping-pong,' followed by a sharp 'pa-da' as the glass shattered; scraps made a soft rustling sound, like a lazy whisper; the sound of a watermelon was a bit rougher, a muffled 'poof—,' like it was moaning in protest.

> [...]
>
> This is nothing less than a conversation. In a way, people are saying 'hello' and acknowledging each other's presence. It's truly amazing. In these moments, my heart feels warm and at ease (Nie, 1989, p. 39).

The protagonist's imagination and emotions highlight how waste can foster a sense of community through shared sensory experiences. In a time of increasing interpersonal alienation —driven by not only the segregated nature of residential compounds but also 'the rapid industrialization, marketization, urbanization, and social change' (Kipnis, 2012, p. 1)— waste reconnects people and restores their identity as part of the collective.

Nie's story also illustrates how self-governance takes shape in managing waste in the absence of authority governance. Since the 1980s, the Chinese central government has actively promoted the *shequ* (community; 社区) system to replace the socialist *danwei* (work unit) system, encouraging *zizhi* (self-government; 自治) as a means of exercising political power at the neighborhood level. Each *shequ* (community) is overseen by a government-appointed Street Office (*jiedao banshi chu*; 街道办事处) and has a locally elected Residents' Committee (*jumin weiyuanhui*; 居民委员会) responsible for managing public affairs within the community.[17] In Nie's story, the new *shequ* system is not yet in place, while the old system has already been dismantled, leaving the protagonist's residential area without any authority or organization in charge. Consequently, when the underground waste chamber overflows and blocks the first-floor neighbor's waste chute, he approaches the protagonist and other residents for help, suggesting everyone work together to clear the chamber once a month. This gives the residents a long-awaited chance to get to know each other after living in the building for some time. They even turn the occasion into a 'waste festival,' staying outside the waste chamber to chat long after the task is done. However, this form of self-

[17] For more details on neighborhood governance in China, see Wan (2021).

governance, built on shared interests and needs, seems unsustainable. As the neighbors become more acquainted and know too much about each other's private lives, they start to view socializing while clearing the waste as a burden. Therefore, when they learn that the Street Office will take over waste management the following year, everyone agrees and is 'quietly relieved' (Nie, 1989, p. 41). The protagonist's imagined 'collective' is then shattered by neighborly relations that blur the line between individuals and the community.

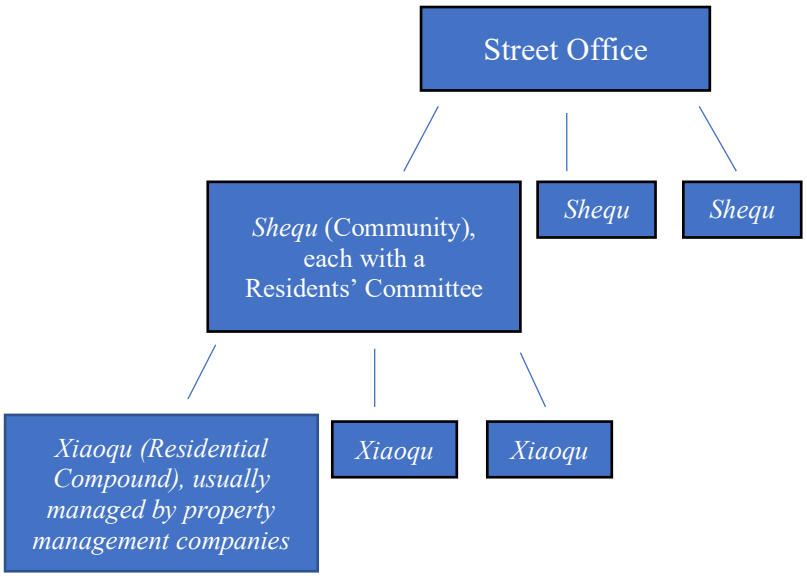

Figure 7. A diagram showing the relationship between the Street Office, *Shequ*, and *Xiaoqu.*

The intricate connections within a neighborhood are most clearly revealed when viewed through the lens of 'waste-scape.' As Nie's story shows, without the issue of waste, the residents from different family backgrounds and occupations might never have connected and engaged in community governance. Meanwhile, the waste chamber serves as a site where conflicts arise, as shown by the residents' eventual estrangement. Waste also prompts varied styles of governance, applied differently depending on the social status of distinct groups. Unlike the Socialist era, when urban neighborhood governance centered on 'ideological mobilization and campaigning,' it is now 'shaped more by the need to service and police a complex population' (Tomba, 2014, p. 33). As such, waste is crucial in tracing everyday

governance because it transcends spatial divides—both among residents within a neighborhood and between different neighborhoods—bringing together spaces and people that are otherwise separated.

In contemporary China, it is no exaggeration to say that urban neighborhood governance is often achieved or reinforced through the creation of 'waste-scape.' My interviews with residents from a residential compound in central Shanghai suggest that the 2019 city-wide mandatory waste sorting policy heightened their sense of 'being governed.' A resident in his twenties who worked at a tech company told me that the feeling is 'very subtle' and 'hard to say if it's a good thing or not.' He said:

> I wasn't happy about the policy at all when it first started. I usually left for work around 11 a.m. and got home around 9 or 10 p.m. Before the policy, I'd just take my trash out on my way out. But then? They locked the bins before 9 a.m.! I was like, seriously? You expected me to wake up early just to throw out the trash?
> [...]
> Then came the pandemic, and it changed my perspective a bit. There was a time when everyone in our compound had to self-quarantine. For about two weeks, we weren't even allowed to go downstairs to pick up takeaway food or throw out our trash. The same people who locked the bins at 9 a.m. were the ones who brought our online orders to the door and took away our waste. In that moment, I actually felt grateful. It was like being in school—you don't like the rules, but you realize that they're necessary.

Other residents had different experiences as their neighborhood turned into a 'waste-scape.' For many elderly residents, whose daily routines were mostly unaffected by the set waste disposal time, their main issue with the governance was the disruptions from noise and uninvited visits to their homes. A resident recalled that in the first few months of mandatory waste sorting, a range of people—from Street Office staff to volunteers—would randomly visit her home to promote waste sorting, hand out free garbage bags, or check if she was sorting her waste correctly. In her seventies and usually went to bed early, the resident spoke with resignation about these visits:

> There was one week when they came three times. I get that they had a job to do, but couldn't they come a bit earlier? My husband and I are usually in bed

> by 9:00 p.m., but one night they rang our doorbell and woke us up around 10:00 p.m. And for what? They just wanted to check if we'd received the free garbage bags and ticked a box on a form, which left my husband and me speechless.

The 'sense of disruption' also came from the loudspeaker outside the waste station in the residential compound. With the waste station only open from 7:00 to 9:00 a.m. and 6:00 to 8:00 p.m., some residents who could not accommodate this schedule would leave their trash bags outside the locked station. To discourage this behavior, the Residents' Committee installed a voice-activated loudspeaker that would blare warnings whenever someone approached the station outside the designated hours. A first-floor resident, living right above the loudspeaker, complained:

> Come on, people were not stupid. Using a loudspeaker to scare people away? What a joke. The real victims were those of us living on the lower floors. Imagine being at home, trying to go about your day, and constantly hearing, 'Please don't put waste on the ground.' It was so annoying and frustrating.

Even though the loudspeaker was eventually deemed ineffective and removed after months of resident complaints, it contributed to forming the 'waste-scape' by instilling a persistent sense of urgency and pressure among the residents. The strategies used to regulate people's waste practices—setting specific times and locations for disposal, making home visits, and using loudspeakers—are ultimately about controlling sensory experiences and enforcing a full-body engagement, echoing the socialist-era hygiene campaigns in a contemporary context.

The concept of the 'waste-scape' manifests in different forms, varying from one neighborhood to another. In middle- and upper-middle-class residential compounds—like the one mentioned above—the various governance methods create an atmosphere that continually reminds residents of the existence of waste and their responsibility to manage it. Yet in neighborhoods regarded as 'marginal' or 'lower-end,' it is the absence of such governance that imbues the space with a sense of waste. In a residential compound near the

suburbs, though there were banners promoting the waste-sorting policy and bins labeled ‘recyclable,’ ‘hazardous,’ ‘wet,’ and ‘dry waste,’ the tension of governance was hardly felt. In contrast to the previously mentioned compound, where someone was always present to monitor waste sorting, the bins in this suburban compound were left unattended. The gatekeeper of the compound, a man in his sixties who also took on roles as a cleaner, security guard, and material handler based on the residents’ needs, explained that after the Street Office provided the four waste bins, no one came to teach the residents how to sort their waste. When I mentioned how other residential compounds implemented the policy, he looked indifferent and said:

> Of course, they’re rich people. We’re just poor folks here. We don’t know anything about those high-end practices. Honestly, I’m already busy enough every day—I don’t need one more thing to worry about.

According to the gatekeeper, most residents in the compound were migrant workers renting their apartments at low cost. Most of them, engaged in physical labor and busy making a living, showed little concern for waste-related issues, much like the gatekeeper. Some residents said they were curious about the four waste bins when they first appeared in the compound and even tried sorting their waste for a while, but when they realized that only a few others were doing it, they ‘lost interest and stopped.’ When asked about the role of the Residents’ Committee and the Street Office in managing their living environment, most residents seemed confused, with one saying, ‘I don’t know much about them. They feel very distant from my life.’

These different ‘waste-scapes’ —some defined by tension from waste-related governance, and others treated as ‘waste’ due to neglect—reveal how both urban spaces and populations are classified. As Tomba (2014) maintains, residential communities are ‘markers of different social groups that are seen as distinct ‘objects’ of governance’ (p. 16). Nevertheless, neighborhoods as ‘waste-scapes’ are connected not only by the movement of

waste—garbage trucks driving across the city, stopping in each neighborhood to collect waste while playing the announcement, 'Dumping the waste, pay attention' —but also by the posters and murals displayed prominently throughout the city. While waste governance practices may differ based on location and the specific 'governed objects,' the posters and murals remain uniform across all areas. The messages conveyed by these visual images and the sensory experiences they evoke are therefore more fundamental to managing everyday urban life than specific governance measures, such as installing bins or enforcing designated dumping times.

Gendering the 'waste-scape'

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, street posters have played a significant role in shaping public opinions and behaviors regarding waste since the early twentieth century. Particularly, during the socialist era, using role models in visual arts to promote 'positive moral [examples] by presenting behavior, values and attitudes which the leadership wants the masses to emulate' was a central component of the CCP propaganda apparatus (Landsberger, 2020, p. 27). Ideally, a model should be someone identifiable, embodying aspects of everyday life or personal experience, yet simultaneously 'made larger than life,' symbolizing 'the concentrated and systematic version of the scattered and unsystematic ideas of the masses' (Landsberger, 2020, p. 27-28). In today's China, while street posters and murals, which were once 'artworks' created by Party-endorsed artists, have now transitioned to computer-generated, advertisement-like images with captions, they still rely on role models, albeit more flattened, to serve as conveyors of officially sanctioned information.

Cartoon figures representing women and children are the most commonly featured role models in street posters and murals promoting waste reduction and sorting in Shanghai and Xiamen. Typically, women are portrayed as figures who not only take on a major

responsibility for sorting waste, but also teach their children how to do so. In the mural shown below (Figure 8), a girl is depicted following her mother or grandmother to dispose of kitchen waste in the designated garbage bin. They both wear happy smiles, which, complemented by the green trees, flying bird, and clear clouds in the background, creates an ecologically harmonious scene. Corresponding to the image, the caption on the mural reads, 'Sort garbage, and posterity will have a happy life' (*Laji yifen, xingfu zisun*; 垃圾一分, 幸福子孙). While men occasionally appear in such murals and posters, their role is more akin to that of a 'bystander' or 'supervisor' rather than a 'participant' who directly handles the garbage. Unlike the woman and girl in Figure 8, who carry garbage bags on their own, neither of the men in Figures 9 and 10 touch the waste using their hands. Instead, they keep a distance from the waste bins, having their children throw the garbage for them. In addition, the captions shift from focusing on subjects like family and future generations to addressing a broader discourse on humanity and nature. In depictions of children, the association of females with waste is equally apparent, if not more so. In images depicting boys and girls working on cleaning tasks together, girls are typically shown sorting waste, while boys are more often seen sweeping floors or taking on other duties (Figure 11 and 12).

Figure 8. Photo taken in Xiamen in January 2021

Figure 9. Photo taken in Shanghai in March 2023. The caption reads, ‘Allow the scattered waste to be recycled as it should, so that polluted water ceases to flow, and the fields can regain their beauty.’

Figure 10. Photo taken in Xiamen in February 2023. The caption reads, ‘Beneficial for residents, enjoyable for visitors, ideal for living.’

Figure 11. Photo taken in Xiamen in February 2023.

Figure 12. Photo taken in Xiamen in February 2023. The caption reads, ‘Leading the way in waste sorting.’

There are multiple underlying meanings within this gendered pattern of representation. Firstly, showcasing women as role models for everyday waste sorting practices while portraying men as ‘bystanders’ or ‘supervisors’ implies that men are the decision-makers while women are merely following men’s directives. Inspired by the Maoist

slogan proclaiming that 'women can hold up half of the sky,'[18] contemporary propaganda posters and murals continue to feature female figures engaged in productive and public activities to highlight the elevation of the social status of women. However, as Quan (2019) rightly points out, the posters and murals have fallen short in capturing and celebrating the genuine progress women have achieved as individuals and collective groups. Instead, by universally depicting women as good citizens, good wives, good mothers, and good daughters, these images reinforce the patriarchal narrative that women are not only subordinate to men but are 'state-owned property' (Quan, 2019, p. 736). On the surface, the posters and murals showcased above may seem to highlight women's important role and participation in the waste sorting campaign. Yet upon closer examination, by positioning women and girls in close proximity to waste—suggesting that they are less valued than men and boys, and portraying them as 'docile' (Sawicki, 1991)—more compliant and responsive to the state's policies, the posters and murals reveal the political agenda of the Party, which seeks to build a green and sustainable society by exerting control over and regulating female bodies.

The governance and objectification of female bodies are also exemplified through idealized images of women in terms of their roles in reproduction, child-care and upbringing, and the maintenance of family happiness. While waste reduction and management intersect with various social, political, and scientific fields, all of which involve women, the posters and murals only emphasize the link between waste sorting and the lives of future generations, implying that the primary means for women to contribute to society and the environment is through their labor within the family. Among the posters and murals that I photographed

[18] The original Chinese phrase is 'Funü neng ding banbian tian' (妇女能顶半边天). For further analysis of the slogan, refer to Quan (2019).

during my fieldwork, there is a recurring juxtaposition of images promoting waste management alongside those advocating for family building and childcare. As illustrated in Figure 13, a heart-shaped poster was affixed to a bin designated for collecting discarded textiles, shoes, bags, and books, depicting a teenage girl, presumably from an underdeveloped region, carrying two children. The caption in the background of the poster reads, 'Help the poor,' while the banners on the bin state, 'Although your clothes are old, your emotion is sincere. Please show your loving heart and let resources be reused.' Targeting urban residents, the image of the teenage girl burdened with the responsibility of caring for her family and children at such a young age serves to moralize the act of waste sorting. Sorting waste and recycling thus become a way of saving women, children, and their families. In another scenario, a box containing free birth control products was placed on a wall adorned with murals depicting themes of happy families, harmonious communities, and waste sorting (Figure 14, 15, and 16). In the murals next to the family portrait, only women and girls are depicted engaging in domestic tasks such as maintaining neighborhood relationships and sorting waste, despite the family comprising both males and females. This perpetuates the norms that female bodies are subjugated to state regulation and confined within the domestic sphere. Women are expected to accept the social responsibility, as dictated by the state, of ideally reproducing two or three children, while also caring for their families and ensuring a clean, harmonious living environment. In 2016, China replaced its 'One-child Policy' with a new 'Two-children Policy.' In 2021, as the birth rate remained low, the 'Three-children Policy' was introduced to encourage each couple to have three children. Childbirth has been an important theme in propaganda posters since the Mao era (Quan, 2019). By drawing attention to how the issue of childbirth is interwoven with waste sorting, I hope to further underscore the disciplining and exploitation of female bodies.

Figure 13. Photo taken in Xiamen in February 2023.

Figure 14. Photo taken in Xiamen in February 2023. The caption on the left reads, ‘Nearby neighbors are better than distant cousins,’ while the caption on the right reads, ‘You and me, civilized and healthy.’

Figure 15 and 16. Photos taken in Xiamen in February 2023. These two murals were on the same wall as Figure 11.

The posters and murals, which connect different neighborhoods, therefore suggest that the primary aim of waste governance is to uphold social stability rather than simply to enhance waste management. Particularly, in 'lower-end' neighborhoods, where waste management is visibly insufficient, the main purpose of saturating the environment with imagery promoting 'happy families' is to maintain social stability by reinforcing traditional gender roles and patrilineal values. Women's duty in waste sorting is framed as a symbol of a 'harmonious' family, which the Party views as essential for regulating social order.[19] This emphasis on upholding a patriarchal ideal of a stable, harmonious society is also reflected in other aspects of how the 'waste-scape' is constructed. For instance, female members of the Street Office or Residents' Committee are often assigned to teach and encourage residents to sort waste, based on the stereotype that women are better at communicating with the general public, whereas male members handle relationships with 'outside' sectors like property management companies or higher authorities. Chapter 5 will explore the gender dynamics within governing bodies in greater detail.

Conclusion

Inspired by my ethnographic experience in Lao Ximen, Shanghai, this chapter explores how waste shapes everyday urban life by prompting various forms of governance. Drawing on the concept of the 'waste-scape,' which I argue refers not only to physical spaces marked by waste but also to the everyday atmosphere it creates, this chapter examines waste sorting practices in neighborhoods across Shanghai and Xiamen, maintaining that post-socialist waste management is focused on sensual governance. While some forms of sensual governance related to waste reinforce hierarchical divisions in urban spaces and among populations, others dismantle these hierarchies, such as the widespread use of street posters

[19] For more on family and social stability in China, see Hao (2022).

and murals in both middle- and upper-middle-class neighborhoods and lower-income areas. Promoting an idealized 'harmonious' society where women are primarily responsible for waste sorting and for educating children about it, while men take on the role of rule-makers, these posters and murals reflect a deeper goal of contemporary waste governance: reinforcing patrilineal family values to sustain social stability.

Another important connection between different 'waste-scapes,' as explored in this chapter through the lens of neighborhoods, is the waste workers who navigate across these spaces. Embodying 'instability,' these workers move across the country, seeking 'stability' in new places through their work with waste. Their roles in neighborhood waste governance are ambiguous, as they are neither 'governors' nor the 'governed,' but exist as outsiders—much like waste that does not fit neatly into any bin. The next chapter will tell their stories.

Chapter 4.

Urban waste workers: a life in between

She was always worried she might have done something wrong, haunted by the fear of being caught out by others. Every tiny detail weighed on her mind—the colleagues who used to get along with her but now stopped talking to her, the people who changed direction to avoid crossing her path. Her life was consumed by anxiety.

But she told herself, 'I have to keep moving forward. There is no going back. If I give up, I'm done for.'
—A female sanitation worker decided to resist (Lü, 2023)

To this day, Zhang Mei has not been found, and it is unlikely she ever will be. She just disappeared in what seemed like an ordinary moment, lost amidst thousands of tons of waste.
—Female sanitation worker disappeared in waste compactor (Chen, 2024)

Most of the sanitation work in Shenzhen is done by older workers, typically between the ages of fifty and sixty. They come from provinces like Guangxi, Hunan, Sichuan, Jiangxi, Henan, and Shaanxi. If you take a moment to notice, you will see how many there are, yet how easily they are overlooked.
—My mom is a cleaner (Zhang, 2023, ch. 1, sec. 2).

The quotes above are from three recent stories about workers in the public and private sectors, whose daily job centered on managing waste. In the first story, sanitation worker Huang Wei was the first in Guangzhou to bring a sexual assault case to court. The excerpt captures her anxiety after her case was accepted by the court and the assaulter, the head of a street administrative department for environmental and public sanitation, was summoned. Although the assaulter was ordered to leave his job and barred from returning as long as Huang remained with the department, she stayed vigilant and uneasy, aware that unfair treatment could still affect her, her family, and other sanitation workers. The second story tells the tragic account of Zhang Mei, a waste worker in her fifties, who fell into a waste compactor at the transfer station where she worked due to insufficient safety training and

excessive workload. The third story, first shared as personal diaries on the author's social media and later published as a non-fiction book, recounts the experiences of the author's mother, who left a small village in Northern China to join her daughter in Shenzhen and took on work as a cleaner in office buildings, shopping malls, and government buildings. By documenting her mother's daily routine, job transitions, and the stories of others she met through her work, the book offers a glimpse into the lives of millions who share the experience of dealing with waste and dirt—lives that are nevertheless 'easily overlooked.'

While using different terms for their protagonists' job titles —*huanwei gong* (环卫工), *qingjie gong* (清洁工), and *baojie* (保洁)[20] —the three stories bring focus to a group of workers who, despite differences in their roles and work environments, make up the largest part of and are essential to the functioning of China's sanitation system. Usually, *huanwei gong* refers to workers employed by government agencies, responsible for keeping public spaces clean and managing urban waste systems efficiently. As the first story illustrates, a major reason many, including the protagonist Huang, choose to stay as *huanwei gong*, is the job's 'appealing benefits,' such as reliable insurance, paid holidays, and subsidies, all 'officially documented' (Lü, 2023). Most importantly, the children of *huanwei gong* can attend public schools in Guangzhou for free, regardless of where they come from or what level of education they plan to pursue (Lü, 2023). Although the benefits for *huanwei gong* vary by location, the job is generally considered as stable and formal. In contrast, *qingjie gong*, *baojie*, and other titles for workers hired by private companies to handle sanitation in office buildings, shopping malls, or residential compounds often refer to contract positions with limited benefits. As explained in the third story, private sanitation companies (Party B) can be fined if Party A—such as office buildings, shopping malls, or residential compounds

[20] Given the specific duties of these jobs, the three terms can all be translated into English as sanitation workers or cleaners.

—is dissatisfied with their cleaning. To avoid fines, these companies enforce exploitative rules on their workers, penalizing them for minor mistakes like ‘sitting down for a short rest’ or ‘leaving a single piece of paper on the ground’ (Zhang, 2023, ch. 1, sec. 2).

In everyday usage, however, these titles take on more nuanced meanings, as the roles of *huanwei gong*, *qingjie gong*, and *baojie* often overlap, and the line between ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ remains fluid and subjective. For example, in the second story, while the waste transfer station was built and run by the local government, its services and staff were provided by a private company. Since the outsourcing arrangement was not made clear during recruitment, workers did not realize their jobs were ‘informal’ until they actually started working. As contract workers, the protagonist Zhang and the driver who crashed into her had never received any safety training before starting their jobs, which directly led to the tragedy. But having a formal job does not guarantee good working or living conditions. According to Hao Zhang and Eli Friedman’s (2018) research, formal sanitation workers in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province frequently took on extra informal work, mainly cleaning for local businesses, to supplement their low incomes. In contrast, sanitation workers in Guangzhou, despite earning higher wages and receiving more benefits, complained that stricter spatio-temporal controls prevented them from engaging in this kind of informal work (Zhang and Friedman, 2018). The feeling of being formal or informal does not always align with whether the job is classified that way. In the third story, the author’s mother felt ‘respected’ and ‘treated like a real person, not just a lowly migrant worker’ when she worked in the government building (2023, ch. 2, sec. 1). Even though her job as a sanitation worker was still temporary and therefore informal, the better working conditions—such as ‘not being constantly monitored,’ ‘having more freedom during work,’ and ‘being treated well by everyone’ —made her feel that her job was ‘better than most formal sanitation workers’ (2023, ch. 2, sec. 1).

This chapter explores the work and lives of urban sanitation workers, whose main duties involve waste management, based on my fieldwork in Shanghai and Xiamen. Despite their differences in job roles, backgrounds, ages, and genders, these workers share the common experience of negotiating the multiple tensions that arise in their everyday labor and mobility. The first tension, as indicated by the three stories, lies in how waste workers, both physically and mentally, move between the 'informal' and 'formal.' So far, most research on people working with waste in contemporary China has concentrated on those in the informal sector, such as waste pickers and merchants who roam the cities and run their own recycling and trading businesses in landfills or suburban areas (Linzner and Salhofer, 2014; Steuer et al., 2017; Wu and Zhang, 2019). In these studies, the informal sector aligns with Philip Huang's (2009) definition: 'workers who have no security of employment, receive few or no benefits, and are often unprotected by labor laws' (p. 405). Few studies have focused on waste workers who shift between the formal and informal sectors, such as registered sanitation workers who collect and sell recyclables after their shifts, or retired factory workers who take on various informal waste-related jobs to support their families. Current scholarship has also overlooked 'formality' and 'informality' as personal experiences and feelings, which shape waste workers' perceptions of themselves, their jobs, and their relationship with others. The space between the formal and informal, as Alena Ledeneva (2024) puts it, 'is filled with tension, which makes them mutually inclusive' (p. 19). By shedding light on the various mobilities within this space and unpacking how they happen, who and what are involved, and how they create new narratives and imagery around waste, this chapter seeks to fill the gap in the existing scholarship.

The second tension that many waste workers face stems from the conflict between their personal desires for how they want to live and their obligations to their families. Most of the workers I met during my fieldwork were senior men and women who had moved to

Shanghai and Xiamen to join their children's families, or retired locals who were unhappy with their pensions and wanted to earn extra money for their children. Their main reason for working with waste was to give their children a better life in the cities. However, their 'sacrifice' was sometimes overlooked or even dismissed by their families for various reasons, such as the perceived 'shame' of the job—whether formal or informal—and health issues, which hindered the development of strong family bonds. Feeling 'lonely' within their own families, waste workers forged stronger connections with each other through shared experiences and emotions. By drawing comfort from fellow workers' happiness and worries, their lives before the job, and their future plans, they rationalized their choice and regained a sense of personal value.

Waste workers' sense of being in-between also comes from their ambiguous position in neighborhood waste governance. As suggested in Chapter 3, neighborhood-level waste management relies on cooperation between Residents' Committees, property management companies, and different levels of government. In this system, each party plays a distinct role in governance, creating not only rules but also an atmosphere that helps facilitate waste management. While each party has its own approach to governance, they all depend on formal and informal waste workers to handle specific tasks like sorting waste at waste stations, 'supervising' residents as they dispose of waste, cleaning bins, and transporting bins to the trucks, among others. However, despite their significant involvement and crucial role in the system, as this chapter will show, most waste workers feel excluded from it. On one hand, even waste workers responsible for supervision said they had no real governing power. Their lower economic and social status prevented them from being able to demand anything from the supposedly 'governed'—residents of middle- and upper-middle-class communities. On the other hand, because their own neighborhoods—usually in less developed areas of the city—lacked proper waste management, they never experienced being 'governed.' For them,

being ‘governed’ is a privilege —one that means a well-organized living environment, safety, and, most importantly, a legitimate identity as a local resident.

Focusing on these tensions, this chapter explores the different types of liminality embodied by waste workers, arguing that their liminal status comes not only from their work, but also from their positions as senior people, migrant parents, or grandparents. As Victor Turner (1969) describes ‘liminal personae,’ they ‘elude or slip through the network of classifications’ and ‘are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial’ (p. 95). Constantly trespassing the boundaries between different spatial contexts and identities—the ‘formal’ and the ‘informal,’ domestic and public spheres, rural homes and urban lives, governing bodies and the overlooked ‘governed,’ to name but a few—waste workers embody the many challenges in China’s social and environmental governance.

Between the ‘formal’ and the ‘informal’

In Shanghai and Xiamen, I interviewed 26 waste workers. Among them, 6 held formal, permanent positions with government agencies, meaning their jobs were secure unless they chose to leave. 16 were employed by private companies under legal contracts, receiving monthly salaries and limited benefits, though their contracts were short-term and typically renewable every one or two years. 4 were informal workers with no official employment ties to either the public or private sector. The 26 waste workers were recruited through snowball sampling, starting with two who I knew prior to my fieldwork. This approach has two main advantages. First, as Xeturah Woodley and Megan Lockard (2016) suggest, it allows me ‘access to “hidden” and marginalized populations’ (p. 321). My two ‘gatekeepers,’ who worked for private property management companies—one in Shanghai and the other in Xiamen—introduced me to both their colleagues and waste workers they

knew outside of their jobs. Through their extensive networks, I realized that many waste workers moved between the so-called 'formal' and 'informal' sectors on a daily basis. Since they usually kept this 'movement' merely within their social circles, it remained 'hidden' from outsiders, but it played a key role in fostering a sense of belonging and companionship among them. Moreover, whereas snowball sampling is often criticized for its limited size and diversity, which can reduce the generalizability of the results (Woodley and Lockard, 2016, p. 323), it helped me gain a better understanding of the waste workers' networks and how they navigated their identities through their interactions within these networks.

For most of the waste workers I spent time with, feeling 'formal' seemed more important than whether their job was actually classified as formal work. While job titles affected how they saw themselves, the feeling of being formal or informal came more from the nature of their duties and their personal and family backgrounds. The experience of Cuiping exemplifies how these labels can be flexible and subjective. In her sixties and originally from Liaoning Province in Northeastern China, Cuiping has been working as a contracted waste worker at 'Oceanic Garden,' a luxury residential complex in Xiamen, since 2017. Her daily work and routine are as follows:

> *6:00-9:00* Residents bring household waste to the four designated waste stations within the compound. Cuiping should arrive at one of the stations before 6:00. During the 3 hours, Cuiping is responsible for ensuring that residents deposit their waste into the appropriate bins. If residents fail to do so, it falls upon her to sort the waste accordingly.
>
> *9:00-18:00* Free time. Cuiping usually does the grocery shopping, heads home to take care of household duties, and handles other family tasks.
>
> *18:00-21:00* At 18:00, Cuiping arrives at the waste station and repeats the morning tasks, continuing until 21:00.

While the definition of informal employment has remained fluid, it is often characterized as 'temporary, [lacking] a formal contract, and [not providing] social insurance benefits or other work protections' (Kuruvilla, Lee, and Gallagher, 2011, p. 20). Waste workers like Cuiping,

however, occupy a middle ground between the realms of the 'formal' and 'informal.' Cuiping's job was offered by the Residents' Committee, unlike most waste workers at 'Oceanic Garden' who were employed by the property management company.[21] Although Cuiping's contract was temporary, she received a stable monthly salary of 2,000 RMB funded by government finance. Without insurance coverage and other welfare benefits, Cuiping was not considered a formal staff member of the Residents' Committee, but she was satisfied about herself 'eating public food' (*chi gongjia fan*; 吃公家饭), a phrase commonly used by Chinese people to denote working for the government or state-owned companies, which carried a sense of honor. Therefore, even though she knew that she was only temporarily hired to help implement the city's waste sorting policy, her connection to the Residents' Committee made her see herself as distinct from the other workers. She said,

> I don't know how to explain this, but I am different from them [whispering, glancing towards several sanitation workers not far away]. They work all day but look at me—I have so much free time. To tell you the truth, I don't rely on this job for money. I just need something to do to pass the time. You know, when people become old, they can easily get brain diseases. I come here to work for a few hours every day, to stay connected with the society. I think this is good for my brain.

Along with the perks of shorter hours, easier tasks, and the 'better reputation' that came with her association with the government, what Cuiping valued most was the freedom to leave the job at any time—something that, in her opinion, set her apart from the other workers. During our conversation, Cuiping often mentioned that she was a retired factory worker from her hometown, receiving a monthly pension that was 'not much, but enough for a decent life.' She also emphasized that the factory was state-owned and shared how difficult it had been to secure a formal position there when she was young. For her, the job as a waste worker was

[21] When Xiamen introduced waste sorting in 2017, Residents' Committees across the city were required by the city government to assign staff to residential compounds to help residents improve their waste sorting.

just a temporary transition that would not change her identity as a retired formal worker. She believed that she would return to her hometown soon to 'enjoy her retirement life.'

The gate of 'Oceanic Garden' thus represents a line that cut Cuiping's life into two different parts. Outside the gate, she was a retired factory worker, a proud parent and grandparent who had relocated to Xiamen for her daughter, who, as Cuiping put it, 'is very smart and went to a good college.' Inside the gate, however, after putting on a red vest labeled with the title 'waste sorting worker,' she undertook a role that she described as 'the lowest job that nobody would love to do.' When people asked why she took this job, Cuiping would always say that she needed to 'stay connected to society.' However, at the same time, she often mentioned feeling 'lonely and disconnected' while working. This was partly because the four waste stations were spread out across the compound, so Cuiping rarely had the chance to interact with the other three waste workers, who were also hired by the Residents' Committee. Meanwhile, her communication with the other sanitation workers employed by the property management company was 'limited' because she did not know what to talk about, given their 'different backgrounds.' Cuiping felt trapped in 'a state of isolation,' torn between seeing herself as part of the formal world and her current reality in the informal sector.

The pursuit of 'formality' was also common among other waste workers who had no previous formal job experience. Old Li, for example, explained that, to him, formality is more of a way of life than a social identity. In his seventies and originally from a nearby village, Old Li became a sanitation worker at 'Oceanic Garden' because of his firm belief in 'self-reliance' (*zi shi qi li*; 自食其力). His main job each day was cleaning the waste bins and stations—the kind of work 'nobody wants to do.' Before moving to Xiamen, he had spent his entire life as a farmer. It was only after his wife's passing, which left him feeling 'lonely,' that he decided to join his son in the city. Unlike Cuiping, Old Li had never held a formal job

before. As a farmer, this position—with an official contract from the property management company and a relatively stable monthly salary—was the most formal job he had ever had, which gave him a strong sense of personal value and independence. When discussing the difference between his life in Xiamen and his previous life, he said,

> The one thing that hasn't changed is that I still live on my own. My son says I don't need to work, but I don't want to be a burden to him. As long as I'm able, I'll earn my own living. The difference is, I actually prefer working for a company. Being a farmer was tough—you were at the mercy of the Heaven. Now, having a steady salary makes life much less stressful.

However, while Old Li believed his job was 'formal' enough and therefore 'decent,' those around him, including Cuiping, did not see it the same way. Some of Old Li's actions, which he saw as attempts to 'fit in as a real employee,' sometimes resulted in mockery and being left out. For instance, Old Li was meticulous about the cleanliness of his uniform, shoes, and cleaning tools, believing this was how a 'formal' worker should present himself. When he noticed that his colleagues did not feel the same—some even 'never washed their uniforms'—he could not help trying to 'educate' them. This annoyed his colleagues, who began talking behind his back and, according to Old Li's assumption, eventually persuaded their boss to assign him the 'dirtiest tasks.' Like Cuiping, Old Li struggled with a sense of emotional in-betweenness, feeling uncertain about his place as neither fully formal nor informal.

Formal sanitation workers with permanent, secure jobs and comprehensive social welfare benefits also move between the formal and informal sectors. A' Feng was a formal employee of the Xiamen City Government's Sanitation Department. Unlike Cuiping and Old Li, who had simple and quick application processes, A' Feng had to pass exams and interviews to get her job. With 8 years of experience and now in her mid-forties, A' Feng was a team leader, managing around 30 sanitation workers, when Cuiping introduced me to her. Cuiping and A' Feng's friendship started with their casual chats outside the Residents'

Committee office, where Cuiping would sign in for work every day and A' Feng was nearby, leading her team in street cleaning, maintaining public facilities, and emptying the street bins. As their friendship grew, A' Feng opened up to Cuiping about the struggles of raising two children after her divorce. She explained that her monthly wage barely covered the expenses, and she would 'never expect anything' from her ex-husband. Showing her support, Cuiping suggested that A'Feng take a part-time job and promised to let her know if a suitable vacancy became available. With Cuiping's help, A' Feng later secured a position as a supplement to her original job. Her daily routine is as follows:

6:00-11:00 Working as a formal sanitation worker.

11:00-14:00 Working as a part-time cleaner at 'Oceanic Garden.'

14:00-17:00 Working as a formal sanitation worker.

18:00-22:00 Working as a part-time cleaner at 'Oceanic Garden.'

A' Feng's experience was common among many of her colleagues, who, faced with low wages, had to find 'informal' ways to make ends meet. For them, moving between the two sectors felt as natural as their daily commute around the city. A' Feng said she 'didn't have the energy to worry about what others thought of her informal part-time job.' She also did not feel proud of her formal job, which, as she often told Cuiping, 'is just an empty title.' The ability to earn extra money by moving between sectors, though often kept quiet, was seen as a fortunate opportunity for A' Feng and her colleagues. Their only concern was whether this mobility would last, as, although the government allowed it now, 'it's hard to say what will happen in the future.'

While formal sanitation workers like A' Feng were allowed to take on any type of informal work, as long as it did not interfere with their primary duties, one thing was strictly prohibited: collecting recyclables during work. The same rule applied to workers employed by private companies, like Old Li, but it was much more lenient. At 'Oceanic Garden,'

everyone knew a man nicknamed ‘Laotou’ (‘Old Guy’), who, as Old Li described, ‘is a jack of all trades.’ Laotou was a waste picker who rode his tricycle around the city to collect recyclables, which he and his wife sorted, packed, and resold from their home in the suburbs. Laotou first started coming to ‘Oceanic Garden’ after a fellow countryman, who worked as a sanitation worker there, told him that the property management company was relaxed about sanitation workers collecting recyclables thrown out by the residents. At first, Laotou only took the recyclables collected by his fellow countryman. In exchange, he gave him a portion of the profits. As more sanitation workers learned about Laotou’s business, they joined in, and Laotou paid them a regular ‘dividend.’ Old Li described Laotou as a ‘fair, nice person,’ saying, ‘If you have problems at home, like broken furniture or appliances, he’s always happy to help fix them.’ Laotou was humbled by the sanitation workers’ compliment, responding:

> We help each other. Everyone has their own struggles. My fellow countryman looks out for me, and I return the favor to him and his friends. Now we’re all friends. Sometimes, I invite them over for a drink!

Of all the people connected to Laotou, Cuiping might be the least likely. As mentioned earlier, Cuiping’s connection to the Residents’ Committee and her background as a retired formal worker made her feel somewhat above the other waste workers. Therefore, she was embarrassed when I accidentally discovered that she, too, had been ‘trading’ with Laotou. Speaking softly, she explained, ‘I’m not doing it for the money. Laotou is an interesting guy. I just enjoy chatting with him.’

Seen as a waste-scape, ‘Oceanic Garden’ becomes a space where the formal and informal worlds of waste workers intersect. The oscillation between these worlds, both physically and psychologically, made it difficult for them to maintain a consistent identity and exposes them to risks if they are ever cut off from crossing those boundaries. At the same time, moving between the formal and informal sectors can be productive, offering them

opportunities to earn a better living and form social connections. These social connections are important, especially when waste workers face challenges in building strong inter-generational relationships within their families.

Between home and the public sphere

For many waste workers, the tensions arising from their ambiguous role within the family weigh heavier than the struggles of navigating their uncertain status between formal and informal sectors. While current studies on intergenerational relationships have been focused on how elderly (grand)parents, particularly migrant (grand)parents, navigate family obligations and childcare within the domestic sphere (Qi, 2018; Zhao and Huang, 2018; Lin and Mao, 2022), there has been little attention given to how their social interactions in the public sphere impact family dynamics and self-identity. Drawing on the stories of several waste workers in Shanghai, the following section explores how their daily transitions between home and public spaces—primarily their work sites—reinforce their liminal conditions.

Unlike Xiamen's 'Oceanic Garden,' where the four waste stations are located within the compound, close to the residential buildings, Shanghai's 'Happy Community' moved the entire waste management process to a garage at the corner of the compound. The purpose, according to a staff member from the property management company, is to 'minimize the disturbance from waste and its smell for residents,' since the garage entrance faces a quiet alley with little traffic or pedestrian activity during the day. However, the relocation imposed additional tasks on the compound's waste workers, requiring them to transport all the waste bins to the garage, a journey that would take 15-25 minutes on foot or 5-10 minutes by tricycle one way. When I first visited the garage, which spans about 20 square meters, there were 10 waste workers in uniforms sorting waste and cleaning the bins. They worked from

7:00 in the morning until 17:00 in the afternoon, with 1 hour in the middle allocated for lunch and rest. During the day, there were 2 rounds of 'inspection' by an employer of the property management company partnered with 'Happy Community.' The inspections not only focused on whether the waste workers performed their duties correctly and efficiently but also aimed to stop any attempts to secretly retain recyclables, especially cardboard and plastic bottles.

Uncle Wang was among the waste workers working in the garage. Before coming to Shanghai, he and his wife had run a small noodle house in a town in northern Jiangsu Province. Their son attended college in Shanghai and after graduating, secured a job there and later got married. In 2019, Uncle Wang's elder grandson was born, and two years later, the family welcomed their second baby. Like many migrants who could not afford babysitters, Uncle Wang's son asked if his parents could come and help. Initially, only Uncle Wang's wife came while Uncle Wang remained in their hometown to manage the noodle house—a common pattern among migrant waste workers. However, after the birth of the second baby, his wife found herself unable to take care of both children alone. Additionally, the noodle house faced financial challenges due to the Covid-19 lockdowns. Consequently, Uncle Wang made the decision to close down the business and relocate to Shanghai. Upon making the decision, his aim was to assist his wife with grandparenting responsibilities while also 'giving it a try in making money in the big city.' Not long after his arrival, Uncle Wang realized that, at his age, it was impossible to find a 'decent and profitable' job. Despite his reluctance, he accepted the offer for his current position.

Though he rarely admitted it, the real reason Uncle Wang insisted on taking the job was not about the money—it was the sense of 'unease' he felt in his son's home. As demonstrated in Lin Qing and Mao Jingyu's (2022) ethnographic study, grandparenting is 'a crucial site to understand intergenerational negotiation,' shaped by contradictory values and varying degrees of tendency towards individualization (p. 54). Contrary to the prevailing

image of ‘selfless grandparents,’ many grandparents, especially those from the post-1950s and 1960s, show increasing awareness of individual benefit and wellbeing (Lin and Mao, 2022, p. 53). To save money and better care for his grandchildren, Uncle Wang chose to stay in his son’s two-bedroom apartment instead of renting a new place, though he felt it was ‘too small for four adults and two children.’ In the beginning, he and his wife shared one bedroom with one of the children, while his son, daughter-in-law, and the other child shared the other bedroom. However, after several nights of being repeatedly woken by the child’s crying, Uncle Wang ended up moving to the living room to sleep. During the day, though Uncle Wang filled his hours with childcare and housework, there were still moments when he felt ‘a sense of emptiness.’ The emptiness mainly came from losing the power to make his own decisions now that he lived in his son’s home with no income of his own. Even for small things like what to eat or how to change the baby’s diaper, Uncle Wang felt he had to ask his son and daughter-in-law for advice, afraid that doing it wrong would upset them. Troubled by the feeling of ‘emptiness,’ Uncle Wang accepted the job offer from ‘Happy Community’ without hesitation. Considering his family obligations and health condition (Uncle Wang had had an operation shortly before moving to Shanghai), he chose to work part-time, from 7:00 to 11:00 in the morning. This was also a compromise between him and his son, who had initially opposed the idea but relented when he saw how determined Uncle Wang was. Speaking of his son’s opposition, Uncle Wang sighed:

> Of course, he is against it. But what choice do I have? Can I just take his money? Yes, yes, he keeps saying that I don’t need to work, that he and his wife can support us. But is that really the case? There is an old saying: ‘He who eats the food of others becomes soft, and he who takes from others’ hands grows weak.’ Even though it’s my son, I feel uneasy relying on him.

However, after Uncle Wang started working again, new conflicts began to emerge. The biggest issue was around the cleanness of his working environment. Uncle Wang never told his family the details of his job. Whenever they asked, he would just say it was ‘basic

cleaning work in a fancy residential complex' to avoid explaining further. The secret came out when he accidentally sprained his back at work and had no choice but to call his son to pick him up. This 'discovery' led to a heated argument in the family, with everyone, including Uncle Wang's wife, insisting that he quit the job. They were worried, first, that it was bad for his health, and second, that he might bring bacteria home, which could be dangerous for the children. Feeling isolated, Uncle Wang went back to his hometown for a few days and refused to talk to his family. Looking back on that experience, Uncle Wang still seemed sad. He said:

> I don't think my health was their real concern—it felt like just an excuse. They think working with waste is dirty and don't want a 'dirty' grandpa around the kids. Even my wife didn't stand by me. I don't understand. Sometimes it feels like they're all a family, and I'm just on the outside.

In the end, Uncle Wang returned to Shanghai, but he stood firm and refused to quit his job. Now, every day when he got home, he would shower, change his clothes, and disinfect his shoes and bags to make sure no 'bacteria' or bad smells entered the apartment. While the cleaning and disinfecting process made the physical boundary between 'home' and his public life clearer, Uncle Wang's sense of where 'home' really was became more ambiguous. As he often said, he felt that the home he once knew was 'stolen' from him after he moved to Shanghai and started working as a waste worker.

While Uncle Wang could briefly 'escape' family responsibilities without feeling guilty because his wife handled most of the childcare, female waste workers struggled more to balance their jobs with their roles as primary caregivers. Yuqin, the youngest in the group at her forties, is a mother of two. Like Uncle Wang, Yuqin is from a rural area in a neighboring province. Yuqin's husband had worked in Shanghai as a migrant worker for many years, but she did not join him until their older child started primary school. Yuqin was outgoing and straightforward, often joking around in the garage, but when it came to her

children, she would become quiet. The reason, as she later explained, was that she was struggling to get along with her two children—one in high school and the other in primary school—which made her feel like an 'unsuccessful mom' whenever she thought about it. She said:

> My kids are good—they don't look down on me for being a waste worker. I know they try hard to stand up for me in front of others. But sometimes, even though they don't say it, I can't help feeling like I embarrass them.

One incident that left her feeling this way was when her children began refusing to eat the food she brought home from the waste garage. In the garage, the waste workers would often say, 'Food waste isn't really waste,' meaning they would take home leftover food that was still edible. The residents at 'Happy Community' knew about this, so many of them would pack nearly expired or just expired food separately to make it easier for the waste workers to take home. Yuqin usually would not take it, but every now and then, if she came across something 'fancy' or 'hard to get,' she would bring it home so her kids could try it. One time, she brought home a bag of candy that looked brand new. The packaging was beautiful and said it was imported from Japan. But when she gave it to her kids, neither of them was interested. Her older son later told her, 'We don't like those fancy snacks,' and asked her to stop bringing them home. Yuqin said it was the first and only time her children ever said something like that. Even though they did not say it directly, she knew what really bothered them was not the candy itself but the fact that it came from leftover food in the trash. Since then, she stopped bringing anything home from the garage, but she began to feel like 'there's some distance' between her and her kids. Yuqin admitted that as the gap between her and her children grew, she had considered quitting her job to spend more time with them, hoping to better understand their thoughts and daily lives. 'They used to have me,' she said. 'Their father was always busy and didn't do much with them, but now it feels like I've let them down too by taking this job.' Even though Yuqin did not want to quit her job, the childcare

responsibilities that fell to her—typical of traditional gender norms—made her feel more burdened than her male colleagues.

At ‘Happy Community,’ the waste workers, each shaped by different backgrounds and life experiences, bonded over a shared longing for home. While most of them had homes in Shanghai, they missed their hometowns, where they believed ‘life was more decent and family relationships were better.’ For them, the homes in Shanghai were filled with tension and conflict, places where they felt ‘they had little control.’ Meanwhile, outside the home, they struggled to fit into public life in Shanghai, as they were too busy working and trying to save money. During lunch, as they sat together and chatted, a waste worker asked the others if they had ever been to the famous Shanghai City God Temple. She said she had always wanted to go but had not had the time since she moved to the city three years ago. The other waste worker told her, ‘It’s not worth going,’ and went on to say:

> I used to think the same thing, like I should at least go once. But you know what? As soon as I got there, I regretted it. Too many people, and everything was so overpriced! Honestly, I’d rather visit the small, rundown temple in my town.

Many people said they could relate, joking that the ‘Happy Community’ felt more like home to them than anywhere else in Shanghai. The curiosity about public life quickly shifted to familiar topics like family and hometowns, with some complaining about their partners and kids while others shared photos from relatives back home. In the end, Yuqin told me, ‘People like us are lonely. I can’t say I belong here, but for my kids’ sake, I can’t go back to my hometown either.

Figure 17. Photo taken outside the waste garage of ‘Happy Community’ in March 2023.

The forgotten workforce

At both ‘Oceanic Garden’ and ‘Happy Community,’ plaques on the gates identified them as local government-recognized waste-sorting model compounds. As a result, the compounds occasionally hosted visits from government officials, staff from other residents’ committees or property management companies, and the press. These visits, intended to promote waste sorting by showcasing role models, are part of the PRC government’s focus on ‘community building’ (*shequ jianshe*; 社区建设), which has opened up possibilities for citizen participation in community-level governance (Bray, 2006). However, as Gary Sigley (2016) points out, while the focus on community has helped expand grassroots social work in managing social affairs, the Party’s priority on ‘maintaining social stability,’ combined with the top-down administrative traditions from the Mao era, means that community governance still follows a paternalistic approach. Technically, Cuiping, who ‘supervised’ waste sorting at ‘Oceanic Garden’ in Xiamen, was meant to act as a social worker, responsible for helping the neighborhood set up an effective waste-sorting system. Similarly, as trained professionals,

waste workers should ideally use their expertise to educate residents, working with them to raise awareness about waste sorting and build lasting habits. Nevertheless, the top-down governance model makes it difficult for waste workers to play an active role in governing the community. Moreover, their low social and economic status creates a barrier to interacting with urban residents on equal terms, even though some waste workers have the authority to correct and guide residents' behavior. As a result, while waste workers are indispensable to community governance, their labor is often overlooked, much like how 'Happy Community' relegated them to an invisible corner.

The erasure of waste workers' labor is most apparent when outsiders visit a residential compound to study their waste-sorting practices. The Residents' Committee, real estate company, and property management company that co-manage the compound all prioritize these 'study visits' because they serve as important opportunities to showcase the performance of the Residents' Committee chief, highlight effective compound management, and help boost apartment sales. As a result, whenever a 'visit' is scheduled, waste workers are required to do extra work to make the compound look its best for the visitors. 'Green Lake Garden' is a newly built residential compound located near 'Happy Community' in downtown Shanghai. Promoted for its 'excellent living environment and resident-friendly management,' it includes advanced waste-sorting facilities such as automatic sorters and disinfection machines. However, the facilities turned out to be ineffective in improving work efficiency or delivering good results. Waste sorted by the automatic machines often needed to be rechecked and sorted manually to ensure it was properly categorized. Because of this, the Residents' Committee and property management company decided to replace the machines with manual labor by waste workers, but the machines were kept as exhibits for visitors.

Sister Sun was a waste worker at 'Green Lake Garden,' where she was originally responsible for keeping the automatic sorting and disinfection machines clean and running

smoothly. When the machines were no longer in use, the property management company reassigned Sister Sun to manually sort through the waste after residents had thrown out their garbage. Although the new tasks were more physically demanding, Sister Sun found them 'manageable' and did not complain. However, whenever she knew visitors were coming, she would 'panic and couldn't help but think about quitting.' Describing herself as 'a calm person most of the time,' Sister Sun struggled to control her anger as she recounted an experience before a visit from the District Government. She said:

> I'll never forget that day. I had finished my work and was about to go home when our boss suddenly showed up and told us that an important leader from the District Government would be inspecting the compound the next day. We were told we had to stay and prepare for the visit. My family was waiting for me to come home and cook, and I really didn't want to stay. But my boss insisted we all had to help and promised overtime pay. I didn't want to make a fuss, so I agreed—but I was not happy, not at all!

The 'preparation' took Sister Sun and her colleagues almost five hours to complete. Along with their regular cleaning, they had two extra tasks to take care of. First, after hearing that the government was planning to introduce a new regulation requiring plastic bags to be removed from residual waste before disposal, the members of the Residents' Committee wanted to impress the government officials by showing them that 'Green Lake Garden' was already following the new rule. Before, residents threw their household food waste into bags and placed them in the bins. The bags would then be filtered out by machines during the collection process when the waste was loaded onto the trucks. Because the visit was announced on short notice, there was not enough time to tell residents to remove the bags when throwing out their waste. So, the only option was for the waste workers to manually sort out the bags. Sister Sun recalled 'digging plastic bags out of residual waste that had been sitting there all day,' and she said it still made her 'feel like vomiting.' The second task Sister Sun had that day was cleaning the automatic machines, which were left unattended unless

there was a visit. Sister Sun said the job was not hard, but she felt it was ‘meaningless and just for show.’

On the day of the visit, Sister Sun was told to stay at one of the waste stations where she usually worked and ‘not to mention yesterday’s preparation if anyone asked.’ All the waste workers were given the same instruction, and although their boss did not say it directly, everyone understood that if they spoke out, they might not receive the overtime pay. In fact, Sister Sun said she never actually met any of the so-called visitors. And even if she did, it would not make a difference: ‘The Residents’ Committee and the property management company take all the credit. The visitors will never know how exhausted we are because of them.’

The top-down approach to community governance not only dictates how waste management is evaluated but also causes inconsistencies in policies and practices. Meihua, a waste worker at ‘Liyuan Compound,’ a smaller and older community near ‘Green Lake Garden,’ said she nearly lost her job due to an abrupt policy change. Employed by the Residents’ Committee, she had been working at ‘Liyuan Compound’ since 2019, helping residents with waste sorting. However, since 2022, partly due to the Covid-19 lockdowns, waste sorting had become less of a priority compared to other issues in the area where Meihua worked. At first, she was informed that she did not need to report to work every day, and eventually, in July 2022, the residents’ committee notified her that her services were no longer required. As a grandmother in her sixties, Meihua was upset about losing her job. She said:

> I remember my last day working for the Residents’ Committee. I had been worried about losing my job for a while, so when they told me the news, it didn’t completely surprise me. But it still hurt. At my age, there aren’t many job opportunities, and I wanted to earn some money to help my daughter buy an apartment. As I walked home that day, my mind went completely blank.

When I visited ‘Liyuan Compound’ in the spring of 2023, I saw a sign on the wall outside the waste station, which, Meihua explained, was used to track the amount of waste sorted each day (Figure 18). The sign was dated ‘July 21, 2022,’ the same month Meihua was let go. This suggests that, after July 2022, no one had been keeping track of the waste sorting. Meihua found a new position as a sanitation worker at ‘Liyuan Compound’ two months after losing her previous job, thanks to her connection with a manager at the property management company. According to her, the Residents’ Committee stopped monitoring waste sorting at ‘Liyuan Compound’ after 2022. Although residents continued sorting their waste, and Meihua’s role was to handle the second-round sorting, she worried about losing her job again. ‘After all,’ she said, ‘if the government suddenly decides to cancel the waste-sorting policy, my job will be gone right away.’

The experiences of Sister Sun and Meihua are just two examples of how waste workers are exploited in a system where they are oppressed by both the governing bodies and the community they serve. During our conversations, Meihua often mentioned how some residents looked down on her and spoke negatively behind her back. She recalled overhearing an older woman speaking in Shanghainese, assuming Meihua would not understand, telling her grandson that if he did not study hard, he would end up doing the same dirty work as Meihua. Meihua said she ‘was used to this kind of thing and wouldn’t get angry,’ but from her expression and tone, it was clear that it still hurt. Like many other waste workers I met, she told me I was a good person, saying, ‘Hardly anyone treats me this kindly, let alone has an interest in me.’

Figure 18. The sign used to track the amount of waste sorted each day at 'Liyuan Compound.' Photo taken in March 2023.

Conclusion

This chapter, based on the ethnographic stories gathered during my fieldwork, shines a light on urban waste workers, especially those employed by government organizations and private companies, who mainly work in residential compounds and neighborhood public spaces. Despite being a crucial part of China's waste-sorting initiatives, they are often overlooked by scholars in the West. This chapter attempts to fill this gap by highlighting some of their experiences as they move between different social and spatial contexts. It demonstrates that urban waste workers embody a state of liminality not only because of their migrant status (many are actually local residents or have prior formal work experience), or their job (many have stable employment), but also because of their roles as older people and parents or grandparents. Although the waste workers I spoke with did not identify gender as a major factor influencing their liminal status, their experiences suggest that gender intersects

with other factors, creating added burdens for certain groups, particularly older female workers who shoulder heavy responsibilities both at work and at home. For many of them, these intersecting identities are the main reason they become waste workers, creating movement between different spaces and categories—the 'formal' and 'informal,' home and public life, self and family—which reinforces their sense of being in between. Set in residential compounds, the stories in this chapter also highlight how waste workers are exploited and excluded within top-down community governance, experiencing oppression from both the governing bodies and the communities they serve.

While waste-related policies and practices have created movement of people and materials from rural areas to cities and within cities, they also generate mobilities in the opposite direction. Just as much of the waste from cities ends up in landfills in the countryside, I trace this movement in the next chapter to explore how waste drives new forms of governance, creates new mobilities, and impacts people's everyday lives in rural China.

Chapter 5.

Reimagining the countryside

In her 2019 familiar essay 'The Zhao Bridge Village' (*Zhaoqiao Cun*; 赵桥村), writer Gu Xiang (顾湘) draws from her experiences living in the countryside to illustrate how municipal solid waste has transformed both the natural environment and the human landscape of rural Shanghai. She writes:

> On the southern bank of the 'Zhao River,' discarded bricks and roof tiles were piled up, forming a line of small 'hills.' Waste accumulated on top of the 'hills,' [...] and when the wind blew, the entire river bank was covered in scattered garbage. [...] In the two nearby blocks, a strong stench from burning garbage filled the air. White wagtails stopped coming.
>
> [...]
>
> To my surprise, in April, brassica rapa flowers sprouted from the 'waste hills,' their beauty so grand it brought me to tears. [...] However, this happened only once. In the years that followed, the Brassica rapa flowers never returned, making me suspect their brief appearance was a calculated move—perhaps staged to pass a government inspection.
>
> [...]
>
> Tips for wandering in the village: familiarize yourself with the map of waste incineration points and control your breath. For instance, when encountering the sign 'Forbid Swimming' on the riverbank, be prepared to exhale deeply, and upon seeing the green banner 'Protecting green mountains and rivers, building beautiful homeland,' take a deep inhale. By doing so, you can pass through the most horrible area—the intersection south of the shrine—without inhaling unpleasant odors (p. 108-110).

Unlike the waste workers in the previous chapter—many of whom moved from the countryside to the city to reunite with family and earn a better living—Gu chose to return to the Zhao Bridge Village, the place her grandparents once called home, seeking solitude and a sanctuary for her artistic pursuits. While Gu's relocation can be seen as part of the growing trend of young people retreating to the countryside to escape the pressures of urban life (Lee, 2024), her writing does not romanticize the countryside as a utopia. Instead, by examining the

pervasive waste and its impact on villagers' daily lives, Gu's essay questions whether the 'illusion of rural life' is merely a modern fantasy.

This chapter, like Gu's essay, explores how waste transforms everyday life and perceptions of the countryside. Following Chapters 3 and 4, it continues to explore how waste drives new forms of mobility, sparks tensions, negotiations, and shifts in governance among different groups, and reconstructs 'the rural' as an alternative modern experiential realm. Meanwhile, by focusing on the countryside, which has been neglected in Chinese waste studies, this chapter offers new perspectives on the concept of waste and its intersections with modern identities and experiences. Throughout the chapter, I will build on the approach from previous chapters, combining textual analysis with anthropological accounts, with a focus not only on visual elements but also on other sensory moments. While visual, textual, and other sensory representations may not always accurately reflect, and at times may even contradict, empirical reality, they nonetheless play a key role in shaping how people understand different issues and the world around them. As Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (1995) note, 'the blurring of representation and reality gave rise to one crucial aspect of modernity—the increasing tendency to understand the 'real' only as its re-presentation' (p. 7). While this argument is premised on the profound influence photographic techniques had on people's perceptions of the 'real' in 1860s and 1870s European cities, it also holds true for contemporary Chinese countryside. Once regarded as the realm where authentic, unmediated Chinese narratives could be found (Lee, 1999, p. xi), the rural life has now become increasingly shaped by cultural productions, especially images, ideas, and stories that are created, circulated, and interpreted via digital platforms. By intertwining popular rural imaginaries, cultural productions consumed within rural communities, and the daily dialogues and activities that constitute rural life, this chapter contends that the countryside not only

offers new insights into waste, gender, and modernity but also points to a futuristic outlook on our relationship with waste and the environment.

The shift in focus towards the rural first mirrors the way waste is brought from cities to the countryside. Although China is transitioning from landfilling most of its urban waste toward incineration and composting/anaerobic digestion, some waste is still sent to unregulated dumps in rural areas, causing serious environmental damage, including plastic and hazardous metal waste leaking into rivers and soil (World Bank, 2019). Meanwhile, as rural infrastructure improves and incomes rise, people in the countryside buy more products and adopt urban-like lifestyles, such as using more disposable products and purchasing goods online. In 2010, rural waste surpassed 500 million pounds per year, for the first time exceeding the amount of urban waste (Chitwood, 2018). To tackle this issue, the Chinese central government has developed and funded a rural waste management system based on the urban model. In this system, waste workers collect municipal solid waste from households, which is then transferred by township workers to county facilities for recycling, landfilling, or incineration (Zou, 2020). However, due to inconsistent funding, a lack of staff, and poor operation and maintenance of waste management facilities, this model has often been ineffective and unsustainable (Zou, 2020). Once seen as the 'dumping ground' for cities, the countryside is now increasingly shaped by its own waste, along with the movement of people and materials, and the changes in governance, lifestyles, and values that waste drives.

The turn to rural areas carries another symbolic meaning. It parallels my experience —and that of many others I have met—of 'going to the countryside,' a practice historically entangled with broader discourses of 'enlightenment, revolution, and socialist industrialization' (Zhang, 2020, p. 1). Throughout the twentieth century, 'going to the countryside' was not only closely tied to political and social movements like rural reconstruction and peasant revolution, but also associated with the rise of cultural expressions

such as native-soil fiction, folklore studies, reportage literature, and so on (Zhang, 2020, p. 7). Works by communist thinker Li Dazhao (李大钊), novelist Shen Congwen (沈从文), and anthropologist Fei Xiaotong (费孝通), among others, show the paradoxical image of Chinese rural society during the Republican period as both traditional and revolutionary, idyllic and backward, static and versatile.[22] While in the first half of the twentieth century, the acts of going (returning) to and writing about the countryside were often voluntary and driven by individual political consciousness and scholarly interests, in Maoist times, urban-to-rural migration was collectively organized and coerced by the Communist Party. Known as the 'Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement' (上山下乡运动), the nationwide mobilization, which broadly spanned from the 1950s to the late 1970s, witnessed 16 million urban youths being sent to the countryside to engage in agricultural production and undergo re-education by peasants (Wu and Fan, 2013). Fueled by this movement, the revolutionary literary and artistic works of the time often portrayed the countryside as alluring frontiers for implementing socialist construction and ideals.[23] Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, with the gradual return of sent-down youths to cities and rural labor flowing into urban areas due to China's reform and opening-up policy (Seeborg, Jin, and Zhu, 2000), 'going to the countryside' as a political and cultural practice has ceased to be a major theme in cultural productions. The rural, whilst still frequently featured in literature, films, and other cultural representations, now often plays a supporting role in constructing urban narratives, by being depicted as the poor, remote, and dirty contrast to the developed metropolis, or as a fantasized homeland and utopia for escapes from urban pressures. Representations of the rural, as Nahui Zhen, Sarah Rogers, and Brooke Wilmsen (2023) point

[22] Major examples include Li Dazhao's (1919) *Youth and the village*, Shen Congwen's (1981) *The border town and other stories*, and Fei Xiaotong's (1992) *From the soil: the foundations of Chinese Society*.
[23] Some examples include *Youth in our Village* (directed by Su Li, 1959), *Song of ideal* (collectively written by students at Peking University in 1972), and Zhang Kangkang's novel *The line of division* (1975).

out, are ‘dominated by the urban gaze,’ which renders ‘certain people, modes of farming, and activities invisible,’ and thus offering ‘little space for alternative understandings of rurality’ (p. 103).

‘Going to the countryside,’ in this chapter, serves as a framework to encapsulate the everyday movement of waste and people between cities and the countryside, as well as within the rural spaces. By presenting the stories of various individuals—activists, college students, and recent graduates who moved from cities to work in rural waste management; local villagers with mixed feelings about these efforts; and government officials showing little interest in the issue—this chapter further explores the questions raised in this section: How does waste management reflect broader challenges in everyday governance in contemporary China? How do people’s sensory experiences of waste shape their daily lives and their perceptions of their neighborhood, the city, and the countryside? And finally, what can waste reveal about the fissures and nuances of Chinese modernity?

The rural dream: waste and activism

Since the early twentieth century, waste, both as a tangible object and as a metaphorical concept, has mobilized diverse forms of activism, ranging from coolies’ rallies to gender-based resistance (Chapter 1 and 2). In contemporary China, however, due to the government’s stringent oversight and limitations on grassroots activism, NGOs established by environmentalists and professionals—albeit facing strict regulation and often needing to collaborate with local governments—have emerged as an important platform for advocating waste-related concerns and demands (Lin and Wong, 2022). For instance, during the anti-incinerator campaigns in the mid-2000s, NGOs served as a middle ground, mediating the tension between the government and residents protesting against the state-led projects of incinerator construction (Wong, 2016). NGOs have also been engaged in urban waste

management, working alongside various levels of governments to facilitate participatory governance (Xie, Zhu and Benson, 2022). By bridging the gap between citizens and governmental bodies, NGOs have significantly influenced our daily dumping and recycling habits, while also shaping our understanding of waste, locality, and identity.

However, most research on how NGOs impact everyday waste practices and narratives in contemporary China has centered around urban areas. Furthermore, existing research has mainly focused on NGOs' collective actions, often neglecting the individual experiences within them—who the activists and volunteers are, why they join and stay in the countryside, what their daily work involves, their roles in local governance, and how they navigate social relationships within and beyond the organizations. There has also been little consideration given to the varying viewpoints and attitudes of local communities and government officials who interact with NGO activists and volunteers on a daily basis, whether through collaborative work or shared living environments. As Anna Lora-Wainwright (2021) points out, it is often oversimplified to portray 'a David-versus-Goliath struggle between communities unconditionally opposed to pollution and local governments and industries in cahoots to maintain the status quo, with the latter almost inevitably winning over the former' (p. xxv). Similarly, media and cultural representations often present rural communities as helpless victims of environmental problems and authoritarian governance, while casting NGOs as saviors who stand with them in resisting the government and industries—despite facing suppression and significant challenges.

The ethnographic stories in this chapter challenge these assumptions in several ways. Firstly, they demonstrate that the perceptions of waste and the countryside held by NGO activists and volunteers are complex and multi-faceted. While some moved or returned to the countryside to assist local communities with waste management, others regarded their rural experiences as a form of stress relief or self-exploration. Moreover, as part of the central

government's new initiative to encourage young people to pursue careers in rural areas to solve youth unemployment problem and balance urban and rural development (Lam, 2023), some volunteers viewed temporary work experience in the countryside as a stepping stone for their career advancement, especially if they aimed to work in government or state-owned sectors. Secondly, the day-to-day interactions among NGO activists, volunteers, villagers, and local government officials are multi-layered, and the dynamics of these interactions directly influence how waste is narrated and managed in a specific locale. Finally, the practices and discourses surrounding waste in rural China extend beyond the typical network of NGOs, governments, and villagers to encompass other often overlooked groups like migrant workers, tourists, and city residents with family ties to the countryside. Waste, therefore, remaps and redefines rural landscapes.

One of the NGOs I visited is the 'Zero Waste Village' (零废弃村落). Founded in 2017, the 'Zero Waste Village' aimed to work with village, town, and county governments to create a sustainable, participatory waste sorting system, reduce the use of disposable plastics by finding alternative materials, and train social workers specialized in waste management (Jincao Tongxing, 2021). By March 2023, when I conducted fieldwork with the organization in Zhejiang, it had completed projects in more than 30 villages in Hebei, Henan, and Jiangxi provinces. Although the NGO was small, with only its founder, Chen Liwen, and two volunteers in Zhejiang during my visit, it was recognized as a leading organization in rural waste management and had received widespread media attention.[24] With its extensive experience in various locations, the 'Zero Waste Village' offered a unique opportunity to explore the complex and diverse relationships involved in waste activism, which other NGOs may not provide.

[24] For example, see *Chengdu Shangbao* (2017), Environment China (2017), Wang (2018), among many others.

While all three members of the 'Zero Waste Village' shared the experience of 'going to the countryside,' their motivations were different. Chen, who had spent years working in environmental NGOs defending citizens' rights against unregulated waste incineration plants and had studied the history of Chinese waste management abroad, described her decision to start her own projects in the countryside as a 'homecoming.' She said:

> I was born and raised in the countryside, and I've always been accustomed to rural life: the wide-open landscapes, the soil and crops, the animals… Beijing never truly felt like home to me, so I always wanted to return to the countryside one day, to live there and make it a better place. When my work in Beijing reached a standstill, I decided to go back to a village in my home province of Hebei to explore opportunities in local waste management. That's where it all began.

For Chen, the countryside was not merely a symbol of home that fostered a sense of belonging; it was also a new experiential realm where she could explore different approaches to waste management. Different from cities, up until the recent decade, waste management in most Chinese rural areas was primarily a domestic matter, typically handled within individual households. Chen remembered that growing up, compostable waste such as leftover food was never labeled as 'waste'; instead, it was seen as fertilizer or food for animals. As for non-compostable waste, Chen's family, much like others in their village, either burned it in their backyard or disposed of it in fields not designated for crop cultivation. This method, which Chen referred to as 'self-management,' remained prevalent when she initiated the 'Zero Waste Village' project in her village in 2017. The biggest change since her childhood was the widespread use of plastic products among villagers, which left the village scattered with informal waste sites. Such contrast in waste management between urban and rural areas motivated Chen to employ her urban experience to, echoing the twentieth century call for 'building the countryside,' develop a waste management approach tailored to rural communities.

From the start, Chen's projects have depended more on short-term volunteers than long-term staff. This was partly because the job's demands—long stays in the countryside, frequent relocations, and low pay—made it difficult to find employees willing to stay long-term. While the frequent turnover of staff brought fresh ideas and diverse perspectives to 'Zero Waste Village,' Chen acknowledged that it also resulted in inconsistent training and management, and at times led to conflicts among members. For example, the two volunteers I met during my fieldwork were both new to the project but had different views on their roles. Jingjing, a recent college graduate majoring in media, saw her volunteering experience as a valuable asset for her graduate school application. Rather than waste, her interest lay more in how the villagers consumed short videos. She was also the one who suggested to Chen that they should set up an account on social media platforms such as Douyin (抖音) and Kuaishou (快手) to publicize their work in the villages. Jingjing's enthusiasm for filming and editing short videos, however, led to conflicts between her and the other volunteer, Linlan. Having been involved in environmental activism for several years and feeling she had a deeper understanding of its challenges, Linlan thought Jingjing's suggestion would not be helpful and could even hinder their work. The conflict between the two intensified as they went door to door, teaching villagers how to sort their waste. Usually, Jingjing and Linlan—sometimes accompanied by a local villager assigned by the village government, and other times on their own—would first ask villagers if they had received the two bins (one for food waste and the other for residual waste) and whether they had started using them to sort their waste. If the villagers agreed, they would enter the kitchen to see how waste sorting was going and offer suggestions or answer any questions. This task was challenging, and it often took three to four visits for the villagers to trust them, let them into their homes, and speak openly. However, Linlan mentioned that while most villagers were friendly and happy to share their views on waste management, they became suspicious and uneasy whenever Jingjing started

filming or taking pictures of them and their homes. Once, a family with whom they had built a good relationship refused to let them into their home when they saw Jingjing trying to film. Linlan could not help but shout, 'Why can't you just stop? We're waste volunteers, not filmmakers!'

Jingjing, however, had a different viewpoint, and she said that her short videos successfully drew more attention to their projects. In the past, Chen usually posted recruitment information on various NGO job search websites, but these platforms reached only a limited audience. After Jingjing began posting volunteer recruitment information on short video platforms, Chen received a surge of inquiries about the positions, with some applicants even submitting their résumés directly. In addition to promoting their work and educating people about waste sorting, Jingjing created content about village life and local agricultural products, believing it could 'help raise funds for the organization and improve the lives of local residents.' However, Chen and Linlan opposed this idea, both because it went against a key principle of NGOs—that they should not be profit-driven—and because it could damage their relationships with local governments and villagers. Despite their disagreement on the matter, Chen recognized that using social media, especially short video platforms, was an effective way to gain attention, which could be helpful for future fundraising.

While the three members of 'Zero Waste Village' shared the same overall goal of protecting the environment, 'going to the countryside' and 'working with waste' had different personal meanings for each: for Chen, it was a homecoming; for Linlan, it was a step forward in her environmental activism career; and for Jingjing, it was a chance to gain practical experience for her graduate school application. These different motivations shaped their working styles and interactions with local governments and villagers, creating varied narratives about waste and rural life. Yet, as women, their ability to work, communicate, and what they could request or offer to local communities was largely conditioned by their gender

identities. Their experiences, as will be discussed in the following section, suggest that rural waste governance in Zhejiang is essentially a space where gender and power intersect and are negotiated.

Rural waste governance: a gendered site of practice

In Chapter 3, I argue that neighborhood waste governance perpetuates and upholds patrilineal values by analyzing how street posters, banners, and murals in cities often depict women as role models for waste sorting, which reinforces the idea that managing household waste is a gendered responsibility. While my fieldwork in Shanghai and Xiamen did not examine gender dynamics within major governing bodies explicitly—such as Residents' Committees, Street Offices, and local governments—my experience with the 'Zero Waste Village' in Zhejiang revealed the significant role gender plays in mobilizing rural waste management. More specifically, in the two villages where Chen and her volunteers worked, gender has become 'a technique of governance' (Griffin, 2015) in waste sorting efforts. While this approach is sometimes effective, it reinforces the masculinized, patrilineal culture in both everyday life in the villages and rural governance.

Since Chen's projects relied heavily on local government support, building strong relationships with officials was a top priority for her team. As she states in her article, 'one of the most important elements of a successful rural waste-sorting program is the active participation of local and grassroots officials' (Chen, 2019). This means officials must not only collaborate with the NGO to implement waste sorting but also take responsibility for sustaining the program after the NGO leaves. While Chen (2019) emphasizes in her article that stipulations from town-level or higher governments,[25] along with top-down evaluation

[25] In contemporary China, villages are governed by the Villagers' Committee (村民委员会), a grassroots autonomous organization elected by villagers, similar to the Residents' Committee in cities. It operates under the supervision of town-level (*xiang*; 乡) and county-level (*xian*; 县) governments.

systems, are key to sustaining rural waste sorting, in our conversation, she also stressed the importance of personal connections between activists and local officials, noting that these relationships should be 'well taken care of.' The relationships, or '*guanxi*' (关系) in Chinese, often involve gift exchange and emotional bonding to 'bring economic, political, and social benefits' (Kipnis, 1997, p. 23). *Guanxi* varies in meaning and use depending on the context—whether among friends, within families, or in the workplace. It crosses class and gender boundaries and is deeply woven into the everyday life of Chinese people (Yang, 1994). For Chen, while many layers of *guanxi* could influence her work, from relationships between villagers and volunteers to those between the NGO and its funder, her connection with local officials was the most critical—if not the deciding—factor. This was firstly because the top-down governance model in the villages made villagers more likely to cooperate if they knew the NGO was backed by the Villagers' Committee. Besides, a good relationship with local officials would make it easier for Chen to get their help whenever a problem arises during work.

However, it was not easy for Chen and her team to build and maintain strong *guanxi* with local officials. In most cases, Chen struggled to communicate directly with the chiefs of the Villagers' Committees, either because 'they were too busy' or because 'they felt someone else was better suited to handle waste management issues.' For example, on her first day in Yiling Village, Chen was introduced to Director Huang, the only female official and the Director of Health and Hygiene for the Villagers' Committee. Chen was told that from then on, Director Huang would handle all matters related to her projects. Like many women in governmental organizations, Director Huang was assigned a portfolio typically associated with her gender—one often seen as 'less demanding, less important and therefore less prestigious and powerful' (Howell, 2008, p. 59). In addition to overseeing health and hygiene, she was also in charge of gender-related issues like family planning, women's

affairs, and elder care, leaving her little time or energy for tasks like waste sorting. Therefore, even though she agreed to help Chen with the project, her ability to contribute was limited. Faced with this challenge, Chen decided to put her project on hold and instead spent most of her time following Director Huang around the village, helping whenever needed. This proved to be an effective way to strengthen the *guanxi* between them. Director Huang became more open with Chen, explaining that the key to successful waste sorting was convincing the women, who are responsible for housework and cooking, to take part. In addition, since women were usually the ones home during the day when Chen's team went door to door to promote waste sorting, their permission and support were crucial for moving Chen's work forward. As Chen became closer to Director Huang, the women in the village trusted her more and were more willing to take part in her project.

Although Director Huang helped Chen build a better connection with the local women —the main labor force in household waste sorting—she was limited in what she could do when it came to issues beyond her responsibilities and authority. Despite being the Director of Health and Hygiene, Director Huang had little involvement in building or maintaining the village's waste management facility, which included an anaerobic digester and a waste station similar to those commonly found in urban residential areas for sorting different types of waste. She also was not responsible for managing the workers at these facilities. Before 2014, when the village built its waste management facilities and introduced waste sorting, villagers managed compostable waste on their own, using it as animal feed or fertilizer. All other waste was collected and sent to landfills or incineration plants, where city waste was also processed. Since 2014, the village has taken a further step by encouraging villagers to separate recyclables from other non-compostable waste, while compostable waste was collected door-to-door and processed in the newly built digester. When Chen arrived in the village in 2020, she was impressed by the facilities but soon realized that both the digester

and the waste station were ‘not being used correctly.’ The digester was filled with plastic waste, and although the area outside the waste station looked clean and organized, inside, waste was carelessly piled up with no sign of sorting. Initially, Chen approached Director Huang to discuss the problems and find a solution. However, she soon realized that Director Huang’s role was solely to encourage villagers to sort their waste before collection. When asked about other aspects of waste management, she would shrug and said, ‘That’s not my responsibility. You should talk to the Chief of the Villagers’ Committee.’

However, building *guanxi* with the Chief of the Villagers’ Committee was much harder than with Director Huang. According to Chen, one of the main reasons was that, as a woman without political power or influence—and with a completely different background, interests, and life goals from the Chief—she ‘had little to offer’ in their relationship. With Director Huang, the *guanxi* went beyond work—it became a personal bond built on mutual empathy. As a woman, Director Huang understood how difficult it was for Chen to persevere in a system that consistently marginalizes women. She said:

> I’m a woman, so I know how hard it is for her. People don’t take women seriously. They say I act like a man—loud, short-tempered, always in a rush. But do you think I want to be this way? I have no choice! If I don’t, the villagers won’t listen to me at all.’

Chen’s team, especially the two volunteers, Linlan and Jingjing, were often questioned by the Chief of the Villagers’ Committee and other officials about their ability to do the work because they were ‘just two young girls.’ Because of this, when I went with Chen to the Chief’s office, catching him before he left for ‘some meeting’—which, according to Chen, was just an excuse to avoid us, he did not acknowledge me after Chen introduced me. Instead, he joked, ‘Ah, Teacher Chen, a new girl? Where are the other two?’ The meeting that day was meant to update the Chief on the issues with the digester. Despite Chen’s efforts to make sure it was used properly—by asking villagers to separate compostable waste during collection—she found that some non-compostable waste had still made its way into the

digester. Chen, therefore, hoped the Chief would ask Uncle Cai, the worker in charge of waste collection and transportation, to remove any non-compostable waste before adding the rest to the digester. Chen had spoken to Uncle Cai before, but he refused, saying his workload was already too heavy. She then asked Director Huang for help, but she could not convince him either—since he was not officially under her authority, he had no obligation to listen to her. The Chief, on the contrary, was the one who appointed Uncle Cai, so Chen believed he could have the influence to persuade him. She also hoped the Chief would ease Uncle Cai's workload by either increasing his pay or hiring another waste worker. However, after listening to Chen, the Chief looked conflicted and said:

> Teacher Chen, we village folks aren't as educated as you, and I truly admire what you're doing. But I have my own difficulties, and I hope you understand. I can't ask Uncle Cai to do more—he's already doing enough. We're all from the same village, and we need to understand each other. Besides, you know that the economy has been tough these past few years. Honestly, we're struggling. This waste sorting idea...it's good, but...it's expensive. How about this? I'll ask Director Huang to talk to the villagers and remind them to be more careful when sorting waste. She really gets along well with the women—they'll listen to her. She can do it! It'll just take some time.

This was not the first time the Chief dodged responsibility, leaving it to Director Huang and the village women, whom he believed should handle most of the waste sorting. Chen said the Chief was fully aware that Director Huang had limited power, but he used her as an excuse to turn down Chen's request. Since Chen's project could not bring immediate economic or political benefits, the Chief saw little value in, or even avoided, building *guanxi* with her.

The emphasis on gender roles in waste management was also evident in the other villages where Chen worked. For example, in the nearby Jinbu Village, after learning about Chen's project, officials from the Villagers' Committee gathered several well-respected women or those with strong community ties and asked if any would volunteer to assist Chen during her time in the village. When no one else stepped up, Caixia, a housewife in her thirties, took the job. At first, Caixia was reluctant, because, like the others, she was already

busy with housework. In Jinbu Village, most families had moved away from farming, instead renting out their land to farmers from other villages or migrants from less developed provinces. Most of the men in the village, including Caixia's husband, ran textile or small commodity businesses in the towns, while their families remained in the village. Living in a well-decorated villa with her 9-year-old son and parents-in-law, Caixia took charge of the household, handling everything from daily meals to her son's education. Busy with household responsibilities, Caixia agreed to help Chen's team promote waste sorting only because, as she put it, 'It would be polite to do this favor for the Villagers' Committee.' A few years ago, Caixia's husband ran into some business troubles, and it was through the Chief of the Villagers' Committee's network that he was able to sort things out. Caixia's involvement in Chen's project was, therefore, the family's way of returning a favor to the Chief of the Villagers' Committee and strengthening their *guanxi*.

In both Yiling Village and Jinbu Village, the local officials viewed 'waste sorting' as women's task. To support this view, they often praised women for their strong communication skills within the community and their meticulous handling of tasks that require attention to detail. On the surface, this seemed to increase women's participation in local governance. However, by taking up their time without acknowledging their contributions, it was essentially a patriarchal strategy that only reduced women's political power and social status. Director Huang was the one who dedicated time and effort to ensure every household in Yiling Village sorted their waste. However, she was excluded from the planning and management of the waste sorting facilities—projects that could more easily attract attention from higher-level governments and bring political gain to the officials involved. Similarly, Caixia took on extra work that should not have been her responsibility if the officials had done their part, but any benefits she gained were more likely to go to her

husband than to her. The *guanxi* in rural waste management is shaped by gender bias, which marginalizes women both publicly and within their families.

Experiencing 'rural modernity'

Beyond their differing views on how waste should be managed, Chen and the local officials also disagreed on why waste sorting was necessary in the countryside. Having worked on waste sorting in both cities and rural areas, Chen believed the villages in Zhejiang were 'ahead of most cities in China in terms of facilities.' To her, if daily governance and management could keep pace, Yilin Village and Jinbu Village had the potential to 'set a new standard for rural waste management,' which she viewed as key to solving China's waste problem. Moreover, Chen's approach to waste sorting was shaped by her two years in rural America, which she often described as 'a great model for the Chinese countryside.' In her perspective, waste sorting was not merely about improving the rural environment—it was also a step toward transforming governance, changing people's values, and modernizing the countryside. The local officials, however, did not see waste sorting as directly tied to the modernization of their villages. They built the facilities and collaborated with Chen solely to adhere to policies from higher-level governments. For them, modernizing the countryside was all about making money, which is why their top priorities were developing tourism, farmers' markets, and the textile industry.

The clash between Chen and the local officials shows how modernity is understood differently by different people, as reflected in their attitudes toward waste in rural China. The role of the countryside in China's modernization has been debated since the early twentieth century, but it has mostly been examined from the perspective of intellectuals, who often regarded rural life as the 'core [aspect] of [China's] cultural essence' (Cody, 2019, p. 22).

Waste management, long seen as a key part of modernization, nevertheless offers insight into how locals perceive modernity in their everyday lives. Beyond the *guanxi* between activists and officials, many others in the countryside have experienced changes in their daily lives due to shifting waste management practices. Who are these people? What types of mobility are they engaged in? How do their relationships with waste shape their perceptions of the countryside? And how do their experiences tell different stories about Chinese modernity?

The local villagers, who were 'urged' by both the NGO and the Villagers' Committee to practice waste sorting, had mixed attitudes toward it. Although most villagers agreed to follow the rules when Chen and the volunteers visited their homes, they sometimes expressed dissatisfaction and confusion. As mentioned earlier, Yilin and Jinbu villages are known for their textile industries, which have created many job opportunities for both local villagers and migrant workers from other rural areas. While migrant workers were employed in large factories on the outskirts of the villages, local women usually worked part-time in small workshops run by neighbors or relatives. During the day, the women gathered in workshops, typically converted from the owner's old house, where they worked on textiles and chatted with each other. Chen frequently visited these workshops, viewing them as a chance to get to know the local women better and hear their thoughts on waste sorting in a more relaxed environment. For many of them, having one-on-one conversations with Chen or her volunteers at home felt uncomfortable, especially when Director Huang and Caixia—both representing the Villagers' Committees—were also present. In the textile workshops, where everyone knew each other and had an equal status, they felt 'safer' sharing their thoughts. However, not every visit went smoothly. One time, when Chen and I visited a workshop, the women became suspicious of our intentions. At first, whenever Chen asked for their opinions on waste sorting, they responded with the same dismissive answers, saying they were just 'uncultured villagers who knew nothing about such a complex topic.' Later, as we visited the

workshop several more times and became more familiar with each other, the women gradually began sharing their honest opinions. They admitted, 'We all know how to sort waste, but we just don't want to do it.' Mei, the workshop owner, expressed views shared by most of the women there. She said:

> Who doesn't know how to sort waste? It's not hard. When it first started, I did it carefully because I thought it was a good thing. But you know what? I saw with my own eyes that all the waste I had carefully sorted was just mixed together again after collection. If I hadn't seen it myself, I wouldn't have believed it. But that's how it is. Since then, I've stopped bothering. We common folks are practical. If you try to fool us, we'll stop playing along.

Inspired by Mei, the women in the workshop started talking about the environmental issues in their village. While they all recognized and appreciated the improvements in the village's environment, particularly the streets, they did not see how waste sorting could contribute to further improvements. Instead, they felt that the focus should be on reducing the amount of plastic and construction waste produced. Mei's husband was a leader of a construction team, and she complained, 'You build something, then tear it down. Build again, tear it down. All the construction waste gets dumped everywhere because the village waste station won't take it. What's the point of sorting waste? It'd be far more useful to stop creating it in the first place!'

Unlike the local villagers, who had opinions about the village's waste management practices but were reluctant to share them for various reasons, migrant workers from other parts of China, working in the textile factories in Yilin and Jinbu Village, felt that waste management had little relevance to their lives. Working and living in factories on the outskirts of the two villages, these migrant workers had little connection to the local community. Chen and I first came across them while we were on our way to check the digester in Yilin Village. As we passed a paddy field, we noticed a group of people digging something out of the ground. The group consisted of two migrant families from Henan Province, both of whom had been living in Yilin Village for over ten years. The paddy field

was used by local villagers to grow Chinese water chestnuts for sale. After the local villagers finished harvesting, leftover water chestnuts remained in the field. Since the migrant workers' factory was nearby, they would go in and gather the remaining chestnuts during their free time. Knowing that Chen and I were working on waste management in the village, Dazhuang, the father of one of the families, laughed and said, 'We're managing waste too! For the locals, these leftover water chestnuts are just waste, but for us, they're a way to save money on food.'

Time felt different for the migrant workers and the local villagers, which also shaped their everyday experience of modernity. When we talked, Dazhuang was amazed by Chen's project and how Yilin Village had become a leader in establishing a rural waste sorting system across China. He said that even thinking about implementing similar waste management in his home village would be impossible, as he described it as 'far more backward than Yilin.' Dazhuang and the other migrant workers were not really interested in learning more about waste sorting, mainly because they lived in factory dorms and did not have to deal with it themselves. But when the conversation turned to their life in Yilin, they became more talkative. Dazhuang's wife told us that she felt the village had developed rapidly since they first arrived, with the factory, most of the villagers' houses, and the streets all being renovated. Their salaries and benefits had improved as well, though they joked, 'The factory owners have made so much money these years. Our pay raise is nothing compared to what they're making.' The migrant workers' perspective, however, sharply contrasts with the views of the local women in the textile workshop about the changes in their village. To them, the village had actually been 'declining,' especially in terms of the income of ordinary villagers. What the migrant workers saw as 'modern'—renovated buildings and waste management facilities, for example—were seen by local villagers as a burden, as they felt the money could have been better used to improve their livelihoods.

While most of the people in this chapter—activists, officials, local villagers, and migrant textile workers—pursued their own versions of 'modernity,' there was another group who came to the countryside precisely to escape it. On social media, 'rural waste picking' has emerged as a trendy topic in recent years. People share photos of themselves carrying bags of waste in rural areas, particularly in the mountains, often accompanied by captions like 'Clean the mountains, cleanse our souls.' Da was among these people. In 2019, he left his job at an internet company in Shanghai, where he 'endured daily anxiety,' and came to a mountain near Yilin Village. During his first few months in the mountain, Da got into the routine of picking up waste left by locals and tourists. He described such activity as providing him with 'inner calm' and making him feel like he was actually 'doing something useful.' After sharing his experiences on social media through pictures and short videos, out of surprise, he received messages from some people asking if they could join him in cleaning up the mountain. This group, composed of people in their late 20s to mid-30s, later established a grassroots environmental organization with a focus on blending outdoor activities in rural areas with environmental protection. Although Da knew Chen, he intentionally kept his distance from her project, saying he did not 'want to be involved in anything political.' For him and most members of his group, collecting waste was a form of self-care—a retreat from the pressures of modern urban life that allowed them to immerse themselves in an idealized 'slow, sustainable lifestyle' rarely found in their daily city routines.

Conclusion

Almost two years after my fieldwork in rural Zhejiang, I received a message from Chen saying that her projects had been put on hold for 'very complex reasons' that she would rather discuss in person. Although her NGO, 'Zero Waste Village,' was still operating, Chen considered it 'finished' since no new projects were planned in the near future. As Chen had

often predicted during our time there, waste sorting in Yilin and Jinbu villages stayed exactly the same as it was before she arrived. Chen was not sure what the officials, Director Huang and the Chief, or the villagers, Caixia, Uncle Cai, and the women in the textile workshops, were doing now. But with a touch of humor and sadness, she said one thing for certain: 'They won't be bothered by waste sorting anymore.' Da, on the contrary, still lived in Yilin Village, and his 'waste-picking' group kept growing. The only change was that, although he had distanced himself from 'politics,' he was now collaborating with the Villagers' Committee on tourism promotion.

Looking back, the stories in this chapter feel like 'waste' in time—soon to be forgotten, just like Chen's waste sorting projects. Like those in other chapters of this section, the stories in this chapter have shed light on the multiple conflicts and challenges within China's waste governance. They show how activism and social work are heavily dependent on connections with government bodies and how gender is used to reinforce patriarchal structures, both in government organizations and within families. Through the stories behind waste management, this chapter also illustrates how 'going to the countryside' shapes different narratives of rural life and diverse perceptions of modernity.

When we were in Zhejiang, Chen often used the phrase *Jiu jiu wei gong* (久久为功), meaning 'making long-term efforts to achieve success,' to emphasize the persistent efforts required to accomplish effective rural waste management. She noted that most government officials and villagers were unaware of this, so they exhibited perfunctory attitudes towards waste sorting once they realized that it produced few immediate benefits. Chen's projects and the waste sorting initiatives in Yilin and Jinbu Villages were short-lived, but they point to a futurological view of waste, suggesting that the ways in which we think about and handle waste today will have consequences for the future. The next section examines this connection

by exploring texts and practices that shape our view of the future—both as a concept of time and as a destination.

Section III.

Futures through waste

Section introduction

As activist Chen Liwen noted, effective waste management demands sustained and long-term commitment. Chen's statements allude to a futurological view of waste, suggesting that the ways in which we think about and handle waste today will have consequences for the future. Indeed, as Tim Cooper (2010) asserts, waste is 'a site of contradiction and conflict between competing...temporalities of value' (p. 1118). What was once considered valuable can now be seen as waste, and this shift between value and waste will continue into the future. My thesis has demonstrated that waste—both material and symbolic—can evoke collective and individual memories of the past, and shape current narratives and practices. It has not yet, however, explored how waste can also shape our imagination of the future, and how the future, as Rebecca Bryant and Daniel M. Knight (2019) put it, 'orients' our daily practices regarding waste. As last section suggest, different perceptions of time led the activist and the villagers to form different opinions and take different actions, affirming that the present 'derives from the future; that without a concept of futurity the present ceases to exist as such' (Bryant and Knight, p. 16). Focusing on the interconnectedness of waste and the notion of the future in both everyday life and cultural productions—an area that has not been substantially explored—this section proposes a futurological approach to studying waste, gender, and modernity in China.

Despite being abstract, the word 'future,' along with related concepts like posterity and development, often came up in discussions about waste during my fieldwork. Li Qingping, the artist who collected waste to create paintings during times of political oppression, viewed waste as a source of hope and a way to envision the future (Chapter 1); the residents of Lao Ximen, a district set for demolition in Shanghai, were anxious about having to relocate to unfamiliar parts of the city in the near future (Chapter 3); and the urban

waste workers dreamed of earning enough money to buy their children decent homes in the cities (Chapter 4). These examples illustrate that people's sensory experiences of waste intermingle and constitute their perceptions of time, with waste being 'haunted by their past and projected futures' (Resnick, 2015, p. 124). The future also takes on different forms and is felt in various ways as people's immediate surroundings and their connection to waste change. Departing from these ethnographic episodes, this chapter explores what I would call the 'future of the everyday'—a future that is felt through people's dynamic and specific relationships with waste, rather than one based on a linear concept of time and progress. As Nancy Munn (1992) points out, the multiple dimensions of temporalization—such as sequencing, timing, and the relationships between past, present, and future—are 'lived or apprehended concretely via the various meaningful connectivities among persons, objects, and space continually being made in and through the everyday world' (p. 116). The ways in which we project the future through waste is closely tied to how it has shaped our past and present.

The various visions of the future that orient people's everyday actions complicate and disrupt the linear modernist framework within which public narratives about waste have been written since the early twentieth century. During that era, Chinese intellectuals, confronted by the threat of Western imperialism, believed that adopting more 'advanced' perspectives on time and history—such as viewing history as a race track where nation-states competed for modernity—was crucial for China to become powerful and prosperous on the global stage (Murthy and Schneider, 2014, p. 2). Mainstream discussions of public affairs, including waste and hygiene, were framed by this narrative style, highlighting national progress and optimistic outlooks for the country's future. The linear mode of storytelling and history writing remains predominant in contemporary Chinese discourse on waste, with media reports and street posters emphasizing the positive impact of waste sorting on future

generations. The government-promoted slogan ‘building ecological civilization,’ widely used in urban and rural waste management, reflects the competitive goal that China is leading the way in creating a new future for humanity, thereby surpassing the West. Even though people’s everyday thoughts about the future should not be completely detached from the dominant socio-historical narrative that foregrounds collective development, they challenge it by offering more possibilities for understanding time. Embedded in individual interactions with waste—a category that entails ‘troubled temporalities’ (Weber, 2022, p. 88)— the alternative futures imagined by waste artists, activists, workers, and communities from both urban and rural settings challenge dominant notions of time shaped by enduring Western dominance and the global spread of Western institutional models.

Engaging with multiple futures also involves reimagining modernity beyond a human-centric perspective. At present, a key narrative promoted by the Chinese government is ‘modernization with Chinese characteristics,’ which gives high priority to ecological protection and environmental improvement (Hu, 2023). Nevertheless, as scholars have observed, this agenda—presented as a path to a positive future—is increasingly tied to techno-digital development (Zhao and Keane, 2023), which continues to reinforce the longstanding divide between culture and nature and assert human control over the natural world. As the next two chapters will illustrate, even though technology has advanced significantly in everyday waste management and artistic creation, its benefits mostly reach only certain people, while others—and non-human beings—are completely left out. Challenging this human-centered view of modernity, this section draws on feminist new materialism, Actor-Network Theory, and Chinese Daoist philosophy—an approach inspired by my fieldwork—to advocate for a more interconnected and relational way of living and developing.

Chapter 6.

Lingering through time

I see the green mountains as tantalizing. Likewise, the mountains should think the same about me.
—Xin Qiji[26]

I come here every day, talking, moving, and breathing with waste. The waste, the ocean, the island, and myself, we are always together.
—Fu Junsheng

The Song poet Xin Qiji's (辛弃疾) verse sprang into my mind when I followed artist Fu Junsheng to the seashore of Chang Island (Changdao; 长岛) in the northern coastal province of Shandong, where he had been collecting waste, or what he called 'wasted lives,' since 2017. As I watched him carefully pick up bottles, shoes, and foam float balls, some of which housed marine life like seaweeds and shellfish (Figure 19), holding them against the sun and ocean as if holding treasures, I could not help but wonder, reminiscent of Xin's musings about mountains, weather those discarded lives were looking back at him, communicating with him in languages beyond my understanding. Despite varied temporal and spatial contexts, Fu's ways of engaging with waste echo the philosophies of Xin and many traditional Chinese poets and artists, who believed in the equal and harmonious interrelation of humanity and non-human lives.

[26] Xin Qiji was a Chinese poet, calligrapher, and military general during the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279). The original Chinese verse reads, '我见青山多妩媚，料青山见我应如是' (Xin, 2017).

Figure 19. Photo taken on Chang Island in November 2023.

Fu's artistic practice and Xin's verse are also connected by their shared perspective on time. Xin wrote the verse in his old age, but as he looked at the green mountains, he felt as if he had forgotten both time and his years. People fade, but the green mountains stand eternal. With a cup of wine in hand and poetry on his lips, he writes that, in that moment, he is one with the ancient poets, sharing their feelings across time (Xin, 2017). Fu, similarly, perceived the passage of time through the ocean and the traces it left upon the shore. In his 30s, he seemed indifferent to the usual expectations—career, marriage, a house, children—things one would usually associate with someone his age. He showed me one of his favorite pieces from his collection—an instant noodle bag stamped with the production date '27. 01. 93' (Figure 20)—and asked if I had ever seen this product on the shelves today. When I answered, 'No,' he nodded and asked, 'This shouldn't even exist in this time, right? But why is it here? What does it mean for us to see it and hold it? Are we in 1993 or 2023?'

Figure 20. Photo taken at Fu's art studio in November 2023.

I did not have an answer for Fu at that moment, but his questions made me think about what happens to waste after we dispose of it—how it never truly disappears but keeps finding its way back to us. In a consumer-driven society, where time is defined by the endless cycle of production, consumption, and disposal, the instant noodle bag—meant to be burned in an incinerator or buried in a landfill—is seen as part of the past, something that should no longer be connected to our daily lives. But as Fu's questions suggest, the instant noodle bag—having escaped the cycle of consumption and entered the ocean's timeline—continues to exist in both the present and the future. The same applies to Fu's other collections. In a human-centered view of time, discarded bottles and shoes are relics of the past. But to marine life like seaweed and shellfish, they are homes in the present and future. Temporality cuts across the waste Fu found on the island, creating 'a site of contradiction and conflict between competing...temporalities of value' (Cooper, 2010, p. 1118).

This chapter explores how waste, by carrying and creating multiple temporalities, directs our daily actions and cultural practices while expanding our vision of the future. In particular, I use visual text (like artworks) and ethnographic accounts to show that waste is more than just a subject of representation—it acts as a 'living being' or 'participant' in our

daily lives. These interactions, which will be analyzed through Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory, feminist assemblage thinking, and Chinese Daoist philosophy, offer a new way of thinking about our relationship with time and the future.

Waste as a 'living being'

While I coined the term 'living being' based on Fu's description of the waste on Chang Island's seashore as 'lives,' the idea that non-human matter can act upon and influence human activities is echoed in various theoretical frameworks. In the humanities and social sciences, debates about non-human agency have developed alongside critiques of the Anthropocene. Though conceptually volatile, the Anthropocene, a proposed term for a geological epoch defined by human influence on global ecosystems, as well as a discourse about the Earth's apocalyptic future, has urged scholars to contemplate the relationship between human-centered disciplines like art and literature, and the pressing ecological crisis of our time. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (2015), for example, suggest that the Anthropocene, often perceived through visual frameworks, is 'primarily a sensorial phenomenon' (p. 3). In this sense, visual frameworks—such as art and film—can also challenge the Anthropocene by offering 'a range of discursive, visual, and sensual strategies that are not confined by the regimes of scientific objectivity, political moralism, or psychological depression' (Davis and Turpin, 2015, p. 4). On a different note, writer and literary critic Amitav Ghosh (2016) points out that the legacy of twentieth century literary movements, particularly the dominance of the realist novel, has restricted our ability to creatively respond to the complexities of climate change. The realist novel's consistent disregard for plot and narrative in favor of a heightened emphasis on style, traits of characters, and nuances of emotion impedes the recognition of critical environmental shifts and extreme climate events as significant subjects worthy of serious literary exploration

(Ghosh, 2016). In anthropology, ethnographers have been 'exploring naturalcultural borderlands' (Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010, p. 548), bringing multispecies perspectives into their work to address ecological concerns. Although they approach it from different angles, scholars across various fields have argued that creative works can influence the Anthropocene as much as science and technology, which are often seen as the main forces shaping its conditions.

My exploration of waste as a 'living being' that plays an active role in the future is rooted in debates on the Anthropocene. Among many theories, Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT) offers a useful way to understand how waste operates within networks of actors that together create the meanings of 'the future' as both material and semiotic. Latour (2005) defines the concept of 'actor' as 'what is made to act by many others' or 'the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it' (p. 46). In other words, whether human or non-human, the actor is never the sole source of action. Instead, action emerges within an actor-network, where actors take on various figurative forms, interacting with and opposing other actors, and accompanied by their own accounts of how action unfolds (Latour, 2005, p. 52-58). In waste studies, ANT has been used to explore the complex power dynamics and relationships between human and non-human actors in waste management. In Natalia Magnani's (2012) analysis of what she calls 'the incinerator network' in Trento, Italy, four key actors are identified as pivotal in the implementation of the incinerator project: the mayor of Trento, the landfill, the local community, and the waste itself (p. 143). These actors are thoroughly assessed before the ultimate decision to construct the incinerator, yet as Magnani (2012) highlights, the 'network' gradually deteriorates due to 'dissidence by the actors' and the intervention of an additional non-human actor—the emergence of a new national regulatory framework pertaining to waste management (p. 144). ANT, therefore, suggests a future-oriented approach to understanding and addressing the

waste problem: it is not simply a challenge that can be resolved through unilateral, human-designed top-down methods; rather, it encompasses a complex web of conflicting goals and interests among interconnected actors.

Beyond real-life practices, recognizing waste as an actor in cultural productions reveals the many networks that shape artistic creation and allows us to transcend the 'formative limits' mentioned by Ghosh while venturing into more effective ways of narrating stories about our planet. According to Latour (2005), the network is 'a concept, not a thing out there. It is a tool to help describe something, not what is being described' (p. 131). As such, using ANT to study cultural productions about waste does not mean viewing a specific artwork, film, or literary text as a network. Instead, it serves as a tool for understanding the shifting relationships among the different actors involved in creating, distributing, and experiencing these cultural works. Several examples in this chapter illustrate this point. While walking in Beijing, Xu Bing (徐冰) came across construction debris—a moment that later inspired a large-scale installation exhibited worldwide (Art China, 2010). Xing Danwen (邢丹文) describes her work as 'the result of interactions between cameras and the surrounding environment,' explaining that the cameras lead her rather than the other way around (*Pengpai*, 2019). As mentioned earlier, waste changed Fu's life and career, leading him to settle on the island, where he created art from 'whatever the ocean washed ashore.' While popular media often depicts artists as independent creators who autonomously discover, select, and work with various materials, interviews and my own conversations with them reveal a more collaborative process—one of shared authorship between the artists and other actors.

To view waste as an actor also means to acknowledge its existence beyond the confines of the contexts set by human subjects, and to understand that it is never fully defined by its semiotics. Art historian Monika Wagner (2001) makes a distinction between 'material'

and ‘matter,’ asserting that material refers only to ‘natural and artificial substances intended for further treatment’ (p. 26). Wu Hung (2019), in his examination of Chinese material art, also points out that it is through an artist’s acts of reassembling, reconstruction, and dissolving that ‘matter’ can be transformed into ‘material’ for artistic creation. Wu (2019) then offers several examples to illustrate such transformation, including how Xu Bing assembled discarded materials and workers’ tools from diverse construction sites across Beijing in order to complete his gigantic installation, *Phoenix*. There is no denying that the ‘material turn’ in art has sparked discussions about the concept of materials, what they can do, and how they change. However, the persistent emphasis on human recreation of materials, particularly artists’ endeavors to imbue them with new geological, cultural, historical, and ecological meanings to confer upon them ‘artistic value’ for use and exhibition, cannot fully capture the discourse on the agency of materials. Something is missing in Wagner and Wu’s discussions about the transformation from ‘matter’ to ‘material’: artists are not the only actor in determining which material becomes part of art and which remains as mere ‘matter;’ neither are they the exclusive arbiters who complete this transformation. Other actors, both human and non-human, contribute to such conversion as well. In the interview with *Art China* (2010), Xu briefly mentions the process where construction waste was gathered from various locations and transported to his studio. He and his assistants then sorted through the waste. Sometimes, among the entire truckload, only a single object was chosen by Xu’s team and later became a brick in his installation. The acquisition and selection process thus entailed intricate networks involving labor and non-human actors such as weather and road conditions, yet Xu, *Art China*, and most studies and reports about the project, did not delve deeper into those aspects. With ANT in mind, I cannot help but wonder who at the construction sites loaded the trucks with waste, whether they knew about the project, how the materials changed in color, shape, and state over years of use

and exposure to sun and rain, and finally, where the waste that was not picked by Xu's team—the residue 'matter'—went. While this chapter may not be able to answer these questions, by drawing attention to them, it aims to underscore the invisible labor and non-human forces that underlie the creation of art.

The above thoughts inspired by Xu's work, however, point to an aspect that ANT places less emphasis on: affect. Though its definition is debated, affect is often seen as a visceral force that drives our immediate actions and initiates the process of understanding and meaning-making (Lenters and McDermott, 2020). It arises within the body but is not limited to it, nor is it 'owned' by individuals (Bazinet and Van Vliet, 2020, p. 47). Instead, affect moves fluidly, traveling between and connecting both human and non-human entities. As Teresa Brennan (2004) explains, the transmission of affect 'undermines the dichotomy between the individual and the environment and the related opposition between the biological and the social' (p. 7). When analyzing Xu's work, it is not enough to identify the relationships between actors; we must also understand the affects that create and disrupt those relationships. How do the affects of the construction workers and truck drivers translate into the installation? When waste becomes art, bringing success and emotional fulfillment to the artist and his team, do those who contributed their labor, yet are often overlooked, feel it? And when the audience engages with the installation, their emotions stirred by it, how are these feelings linked to those experienced during the creation of the artwork?

To explore these questions, it is more useful to combine ANT with assemblage thinking, which, as many have argued, is more attuned to the 'productive role of affect in bringing social-material relations into being' (Müller and Schurr, 2016, p. 217). Unlike Latour, who sees emotions and passions as 'arising out of networks,' scholars of assemblage thinking—most notably Deleuze and Guattari—understand affect as something that coexists

with the assemblage rather than as a product of it (Müller and Schurr, 2016, p. 224). This is clear in Deleuze's (1987) definition of 'assemblage':

> It is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them across ages, sexes and reigns – different natures. Thus, the assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a 'sympathy'. It is never filiations which are important but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind (p. 69 [1977]).

While 'assemblage' shares similarities with Latour's 'network' in that it consists of interconnected components forming a unified whole, without predetermined hierarchies, it differs in its emphasis on embodied experience—ages, sexes, and reigns, and affect—sympathy, as driving forces behind assembling. As Martin Müller (2015) notes, 'desire' is a key characteristic of assemblage, on par with its other features, which are being relational, productive, heterogeneous, and shaped by deterritorialization and reterritorialization (p. 28-29). In relation to the corporeal nature within the assemblage, 'desire' can be seen as a form of visceral force (what defines 'affect') that drives, changes, or unsettles the assemblage's continual state of flux and transformation. It can also create new connections, networks, knowledge, actors, and realities. In other words, assemblage is 'the expression of desire' (Müller and Schurr, 2016, p. 224).

Liu Xintao's (刘芯涛) oil painting series, *Collapsing night* (Kuiye; 溃夜) shows how assemblage thinking, alongside ANT, can be used to represent waste in art. Crafted in black and white, the series captures nocturnal visions of urban landscapes, bringing together elements typically perceived as disparate and unrelated. In one of the paintings (Figure 21), most of the canvas is taken up by cluttered waste, within which lily flowers are blossoming. In the background, a pair of railroad tracks extend into a brightly lit distance, leading toward the direction of the city. In the upper-right corner of the canvas, a couple is cuddling beside the building. The three parts—the waste, city lights, and the couple—form an assemblage

within which the boundaries between human and non-human, darkness and brightness, beauty and ugliness, collapse. Even though the painting is static, it conveys a sense of movement. On the one hand, it is difficult to discern the waste from one another, as they appear intertwined and constantly undergoing metamorphic changes. On the other hand, upon closer examination, the lily flowers and the waste on the ground exhibit similar color, texture, and shape, which creates a perception that they can also transform into each other. As the waste stretches along the railroad tracks, the couple, the building, and the city seem to be 'devoured,' or drawn into this perpetual movement and exchange of matter. Furthermore, as the edge of the canvas transitions into blocks of whiteness and the objects gradually lose their shapes, the entire painting can be seen as actively interacting with forces outside the frame.

Figure 21. *Collapsing night* (2008) by Liu Xintao. Available at: http://www.bjsummit.com/liuxintao/1670.htm?tabSel=tagContent1 (Accessed: September 3, 2023).

With the focus on the dynamic entanglement of waste, humans, and other beings across spaces, the painting materializes Karen Barad's (2007) concept of 'agential cuts.' For Barad, objects or beings are not separated and bordered from external spaces; rather, there are constant exchanges and entanglements of matter—electrons, particles, bacteria, germs, insects between spaces without any currently measurable links (p. 347). These movements, all constituting agencies, render objects and beings as 'cuts' within assemblages of agencies, while the cuts '[do] not disentangle the phenomenon into independent systems' (Barad, 2007, p. 348). Let's consider the human skin as an example. Conventionally regarded as a natural and stable boundary of the human body against toxins and harmful materials in the outside world, the skin is, according to Barad's theory, no more than an agential cut in the dynamic flow of matter within and beyond the body. That is to say, the bodily waste we generate—sweat, excrement, dead hair—never truly leaves our bodies as we assume, and the everyday waste that we want to shed from our bodily confines by avoiding touching, seeing, and smelling it, stays with us despite our belief that we have discarded it. The human skin, in this sense, functions as a 'measuring agency' (Barad, 2007, p. 348) used by human beings to explain particular phenomena happening within and around the bodies. Yet if we place the agential cut somewhere else, as Barad suggests, the original phenomena measured by the old measuring agency change as new measuring agencies emerge. Within the assemblage created by Liu's paintings, the agential cut does not fall upon the human bodies; thus, they do not form the boundary between 'subject' and 'object.' Instead, there are multiple cuts marked on the non-human actors within the composition—the waste and the lily flowers—and the cuts move and intersect to mobilize effects on not only the humans in the painting, but also us outside it. The relocation of agential cuts also leads to shifts in narratives about once familiar phenomenon: compared to waste, humans are no longer a majority in number, and as we continue to produce it at an ever-increasing pace, it consumes us in the same manner.

Where matter moves, affect flows. In Liu's paintings, waste is felt as an affect, with its intrusion into public spaces and private life stirring feelings of resentment and irritation. Liu describes the emotions behind his paintings as follows:

> I took an evening walk and saw wild dogs barking, rats scurrying, and piles of stinking garbage scattered everywhere. Beyond this chaos, the distant skyline of a thriving city emerged, its neon lights glowing intoxicatingly. The contrast was both absurd and almost terrifying (Liu, 2010).

Liu's resentment, anger, and sense of absurdity toward the ways urbanization relies on massive waste production are reflected in the recurring contrast between lily flowers and waste in his series. In addition, desire and disposability are woven throughout the paintings. The painting above portrays a couple embracing affectionately despite the hazardous environment around them. Their faces are obscured; only the man's back is visible, suggesting he is holding the woman. Both are half-naked—the man in black pants and the woman in a white skirt—suggesting a subtle eroticism. Waste becomes sensual, evoking an affect that creates desire and attachment, even when it is decayed and disposable. The juxtaposition of the embracing couple and the waste illustrates how the sense of disposability is transferred between human and non-human actors.

Xing Danwen's work, on the other hand, shows how affect flows not only within an assemblage but also between assemblages. Centered on foreign imported electronic waste in the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong Province, Xing's photographic series *disCONNEXION* features images that bear a compositional resemblance to abstract expressionist paintings, while unveiling the harsh realities of e-waste sorting and recycling. In the photos (Figure 22), swirling metal wires infinitely weaves, neatly sorted discarded keyboards stand in orderly stacks, and compressed electronic components are bundled together with strings. In contrast to Liu's paintings, which evoke feelings of chaos and dynamism, Xing's photos convey a sense of order. The e-waste was meticulously cleaned and organized according to its types, functions, materials, shapes, and even colors. Different from the waste depicted in Liu's

painting, which emanates vitality through movement and interaction with other beings, the waste here appears still and scenic, as if poised for exhibition. As Gao Minglu (2005) observes, Xing employs the modernist aesthetic of 'beneficial beautification' to counterbalance the harmful nature of her subject (p. 230), while at the same time, this beautification highlights the stark contrast between what is inside the picture and what is outside. Beneath the neatly sorted, art-like waste lay the strenuous labor of the local residents, who, as Xing describes, '[lived] in radioactive garbage, breathing in burned rubber and plastic, and drinking contaminated water' (Hu, 2022). In this sense, the title *disConnexion* holds two contrasting meanings. On the one hand, it illustrates the isolating status and conditions of both the e-waste and the workers who sorted them. On the other hand, the title itself is intentionally ironic, as the supposed 'isolation' is merely an illusion. In fact, a closer look at the photos reveals traces of connection to the outside world—newspaper scraps, handwritten notes, trademarks, and mineral water bottles—all pointing to the complex networks of relationships surrounding the artwork. The audience also gets affected by viewing these photos, as they become aware of the conditions in which the photos were taken. The e-waste that is discarded is never truly disconnected from those who discarded it. The photos become a nexus where different assemblages converge —artistic expression, e-waste sorting and recycling, and the audience's daily habits of consumption and disposal.

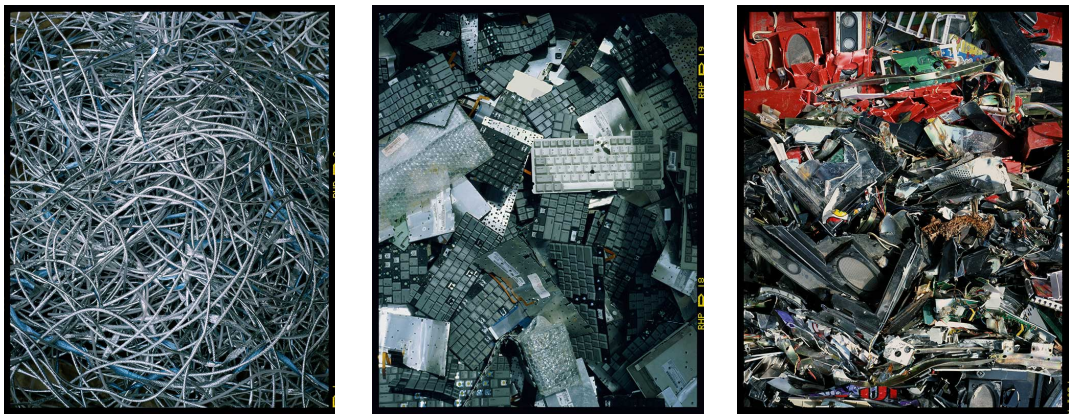

Figure 22. *disConnexion* by Xing Danwen. Available at: http://danwen.com/works/disconnexion (Accessed: September 4, 2023).

Although Xu, Liu, and Xing do not explicitly engage with time-related themes in their works, their art responds to ANT and assemblage thinking, offering a future-oriented perspective on our relationship with waste and the world. By inviting us to see waste as an 'actor,' their works criticize the human-centered lifestyle and the disregard for the non-human world. They show that humans, waste, and other actors are all intertwined, equally influencing and being influenced by one another. The future is thus implicated in this entanglement, where waste will become overwhelming and 'act upon' humans (Xu and Liu) if we continue living in such a disconnected way (Xing). Meanwhile, through assemblage thinking, their works prompt recognition of coexisting temporalities—for instance, while people discard things and declare their lives over, they begin a new life as waste, one that often outlasts human lifespans. The different times—geological, archaeological/historical, human, and non-human experiential—commingle and coexist through the assembling of various actors, affects, and relationships (Hamilakis, 2017, p. 173).

While multi-temporality is often seen as emerging from assemblage, which challenges modernity's tendency to position human as the central point of reference for understanding and experiencing time, in Chinese Daoist philosophy, it is integral to the complex relationships between humans and non-humans. Drawing on what he called traditional Chinese philosophy' (*chuantong zhongguo zhexue*; 传统中国哲学), Fu Junsheng's artistic practice offers new ways of reimagining our relationship with waste and envisioning possible futures with it.

In accordance with time

In traditional Chinese philosophy, time and humans are seen as interconnected and unified. This perception contrasts with the traditional view in the predominantly Christian West, where time's movement and changes are seen as separate from human activity, and

time is believed to have a beginning and an end, with eternity existing beyond it (He, 2010, p. 100). Daoist philosophy views time as eternal, a pathway to understanding the Dao (道) (He, 2010, p. 101). Literally, the Dao means 'roadway' and, by extension, 'method.' In philosophy, it refers to 'the path or teachings (or truths) that followers of a particular school adhere to' (Roberts, 2002, p. 19). The *Dao de jing* (道德经), the foundational text of Daoism traditionally attributed to the sage Laozi (老子), redefines the Dao as a universal principle—'the general truth that there is a course all things follow and a force that guides them on it' (Roberts, 2002, p. 19). In the *Dao de jing*, the Dao is described as *heng* (恒; eternal), which highlights the ' "living longer" of the myriad creatures [...] and the "never dying" of [Dao] as the natural force of giving birth' (Wang, Q., 2001, p. 55). Unlike Heidegger's view of time as being centered around death, Laozi's philosophy of the Dao is 'grounded on "coming-from-birth" ' (Wang, Q., 2001, p. 55). Meanwhile, 'living' and 'birth' —both integral to the concept of *sheng* (生)—define the experience of time. Laozi said:

> Heaven is the Way, and the Way is long life, a life without trouble (Laozi et al., 2012, p. 103).
>
> The Tao [Dao] gives birth to one, one gives birth to two, two gives birth to three, three gives birth to ten thousand things (Laozi et al., 2012, p. 208).[27]

These passages reveal that Laozi's concept of time is closely tied to his understanding of the Dao and its role in guiding the birth of the 'ten thousand things' —both human and non-human—in the universe. Initially, time is the Dao, within which all movement and change occur (Wang, Z., 2023). From this perspective, time is eternal and governs the finite time experienced by the 'ten thousand things.' However, because finite time flows within the eternal time of the Dao, it can stretch and extend if the 'thing' experiencing it follows the Dao

[27] 'Tao' and 'Dao' are different ways of romanizing 道. The version of the *Dao de jing* I quoted, translated by Red Pine, uses 'Tao.'

(Wang, Z., 2023, p. 8). Judith Farquhar and Qicheng Zhang's (2012) analysis of the 'ten thousand things' helps illuminate how finite and eternal time are unified in a contemporary context through life nurturing. Focusing on social craftwork and cultural practices that create meaningful ways of living within 'a metaphysics of the Way [Dao] and its manifestations' (Zhang and Farquhar, 2012, p. 15), they demonstrate how the 'ten thousand things'—the myriad things and their generative capacities—are expressed in the everyday practices of following the Dao.

This association between time and the Dao in Daoist thought helps explain why both human and non-human activities are closely intertwined with and influenced by time. In everyday life, practices like agriculture, farming, and medicine should follow the natural cycles of the years, seasons, and days. Mencius (孟子), the Confucian philosopher, said:

> If you do not interfere with the busy seasons in the fields, then there will be more grain than the people can eat; if you do not allow nets with too fine a mesh to be used in large ponds, then there will be more fish and turtles than they can eat; if hatches and axes are permitted in the forests on the hills only in the proper seasons, then there will be more timber than they can use (Mencius and Lau, D. C., 2004, p. 31).

The *Huangdi neijing* (黄帝内经; *Inner canon of the Yellow Emperor*), a key text in Chinese medicine, associates each part of the human body with a specific time of day. In addition, Chinese physicians developed their theories and practices around the regular patterns of the seasons (Hsu, 2007, p. 114). These examples indicate that time plays a significant role in shaping the daily lives of humans.

The unity of time and humanity aligns with the concept of 'the unity of Heaven and Man' (*Tian ren he yi*; 天人合一), which many scholars see as a core value in traditional Chinese philosophy for addressing ecological issues (Chen and Bu, 2019). Philosopher and historian Fung Yu-lan (1952) identified five distinct connotations of the term 'Heaven': a 'material' or 'physical sky,' an anthropomorphic emperor of Heaven, destiny or fate, nature,

and the moral order of the universe (p. 31). In the *Dao de jing*, Laozi describes the relationship between the Dao and the Heaven as follows:

> Imagine a nebulous thing
> here before Heaven and Earth
> subtle and elusive
> dwelling apart and unconstrained
> it could be the mother of us all
> not knowing its name
> I call it the Tao [Dao]
> forced to describe it
> I describe it as great
> Great means ever-flowing
> [...]
> Humankind imitates Earth
> Earth imitates Heaven
> Heaven imitates the Tao [Dao]
> and the Tao [Dao] imitates itself (Laozi et al., 2012, p. 140)

Integrating Laozi's excerpt with Fung's interpretation offers a clearer understanding of the concept of the Heaven. The Heaven is created by and 'imitates' the Dao, which means that it embodies its qualities of greatness and continuous flow. Since the Dao 'dwells apart,' humankind is unaware of its existence, even while being surrounded and guided by it (Laozi et al., 2012, p. 141). As a result, they come to see the Heaven as the Dao. In this sense, the idea of 'the unity of Heaven and Man' first implies that humankind follows the Heaven—the Dao—and then highlights the importance of living in harmony with all things governed by the Heaven, coexisting and participating in the functioning of the universe.

Philosophers and scholars throughout history have offered insights on ways to achieve 'the unity of Heaven and Man.' Following Laozi, Zhuangzi (庄子), who wrote another foundational Daoist text alongside the *Dao de jing*, suggested that *ziran* (自然) is the way to harmony between humans and Heaven. The term *ziran* (自然), now used to translate the modern English word 'nature,' carries a different meaning in early Daoist thought. In the texts of Laozi and Zhuangzi, *ziran* does not refer to the external environment that humans and other beings live in, as it does in the modern sense. Instead, it means 'self-soing,' 'self-

going,' 'being free,' or 'spontaneous'— 'a happening' that unfolds naturally through the Dao (Liu, 2016, p. 267). The 'self' here should not be understood as humans as subjects; it refers to 'any being' (Liu, 2016, p. 267). While Laozi believed humans should follow and practice *ziran*, Zhuangzi emphasized that *ziran* 'is already there' and needs no effort (Liu, 2019, p. 42). He also believed that to *ziran* is to see all things as equal and let them be as they are. As he said, 'Heaven and Earth share the same life with me, and the myriad things are one with me' (Guo and Lynn, 2022, p. 31). This means that when everything unfolds according to its own *ziran*, even Heaven and Earth 'will lack the means to be thought long-lived' (Guo and Lynn, 2022, p. 31). They, 'me,' and 'the myriad things' become one and share the same life. However, Mencius and other Confucian philosophers had different views on how to achieve 'the unity of Heaven and Man.' For Mencius, influenced by Confucius, the Heaven is the source of morality (Wang, C., 2024). As he said, 'For a man to give full realization to his heart is for him to understand his own nature, and a man who knows his own nature will know Heaven' (Mencius and Lau, D. C., 2004, p. 113). Therefore, the nurturing of one's nature is the primary means by which he achieves unity with the Heaven.

Focusing on 'unity,' traditional Chinese philosophy, particularly Daoist philosophy, offers a different approach to analyzing artistic representations of waste than ANT and assemblage thinking. Rather than dismantling dualisms, it starts from the belief that divisions between nature and culture, human and non-human, or subject and object do not inherently exist. It is also future-oriented, as it recognizes the influence of time on both human and non-human activities and emphasizes letting things unfold naturally without interference. In the next section, I show how Fu integrated these ideas into both his artistic practice and his everyday life, reflecting a way of thinking that encourages us to rethink the relationship between waste and modernity.

A shared future with waste

As the opening episode of this chapter illustrates, waste changed Fu's perception of time. Things like the instant noodle bag from 1993 could easily bring back his childhood memories. Born in a village near Chang Island in Yantai, Fu has felt a deep connection to the ocean since childhood. According to him, in the early 1980s, the shores of his village were mostly free of waste, except for fallen wood, leaves, rotting fruit and vegetables, and dead fish. Around the time Fu graduated from primary school in the early 1990s, the shores had changed from a 'playground' for him and his friends to a 'dumping ground' for the villagers—a place most parents now kept their children away from. Fu described how he felt at the time as 'sad and confused.' He said:

> I don't remember it clearly now, but it feels like the change happened really fast. I went to primary school in town, so I only came back to the village during winter and summer breaks. I remember one summer, either in fifth or sixth grade—I'm not sure—but one year, when I went down to the seashore, it was suddenly covered in plastic waste. The year before, it wasn't like that at all. In just one year, the seashore we had known our whole lives was gone.
> [...]
> I often think that time must feel different depending on where you live. In big cities like Beijing and Shanghai, where new developments always begin, change happens gradually—you can see it unfold. But in small places like my village, which was isolated for so long, when something new comes in, it feels like everything changes all at once, catching you off guard before you are even ready.

Plastic goods, which brought about plastic waste, were one of the 'new things' Fu mentioned that disrupted the villagers' sense of time. They poured into the village, symbolizing ideas like 'market economy' and 'opening up'—terms the villagers had only vaguely heard from those who traveled to towns or cities for business. Their sudden arrival made the villagers feel as though they were 'catching up' with the rest of the country as economic reforms took hold in the 1980s and 1990s. However, the waste from plastic and other consumer goods 'slowed down' time again. Fu explained that even today, despite efforts by the local government and the Villagers' Committee to clean the shores, they are still covered in

municipal waste. Some of the waste, either left on the shores by villagers or washed up by the ocean, had been there for years. In contrast to the village, which Fu said 'has changed a lot' over the past few decades due to industrialization, the shores seemed frozen in time, visited only by waste.

When Fu first moved to Chang Island, he found the situation there was just like in his village. Located between the Bohai Sea and the Yellow Sea, where currents from Japan, the Korean Peninsula, and East China Sea meet, Chang Island has become a gathering point for waste from various places. Fu admitted that the variety of waste on the beaches was what made him decide to stay on Chang Island. In his collections, broken lighters with Korean characters are placed next to a torn Chinese national flag, while liquor glasses are displayed alongside the skulls of the endangered East Asian finless porpoise. Arranged in Fu's studio, these items, or, as Fu called them, 'wasted lives with their own temporality, life cycles, and paths of movement' epitomize what Rosi Braidotti (2011) refers to as 'nomadic subjects'—'a materially embedded and embodied, affective and relational collective assemblage, a relay-point for a web of complex relations that displace the centrality of ego-indexed notions of identity' (p. 149). While Braidotti (2011) initially uses this concept to speak for people, including herself, who embrace multilingualism, difference, and complexity to challenge 'the liberal notion of the sovereign subject' and overcome 'the dualism of Self/Other, Sameness/Difference which is intrinsic to that vision of the subject' (p. 149), it can also serve as an approach for understanding non-human lives. Embedded with different temporalities, locations, and species, the 'wasted lives' in Fu's studio come together as assemblages. By immersing myself in this space, I too became part of them—a fellow nomadic subject.

The feelings of being 'nomadic' and 'connected' deepened as I followed Fu to the seashores. At first, coming from a big city, I was worried I would feel out of place on the island. That worry faded away within the first couple of days. A severe winter storm shut

down all transportation to the mainland, so I had no choice but to stay in the compound where my hotel was, passing the time chatting with local residents. The shared concern about the weather quickly brought me and the residents together, and the sense of 'connectedness' was not merely between people but also with the storm, the plants, and the standing water in the yard. This constant crossing of boundaries between insider/outsider and human/nonhuman helped me better understand what it means to be 'nomadic' and embrace new networks and assemblages that arise in between and beyond. For several days before the winter storm, Fu and I had scant findings during our 'waste picking' walks. However, following the storm, the beaches were teeming with items and marine life carried in by the wind and currents. At times, when we came across incomplete objects like a single shoe from a pair, a fragment of a china plate, or limbs of plastic mannequins, we would venture another two or three kilometers in an attempt to find the missing halves or additional parts, but our endeavors often proved unsuccessful. Unlike many other artists—like Xu Bing, as we discussed earlier—who had trucks of waste delivered to his studio from all over Beijing, Fu relied entirely on what he found, or as he put it, 'what nature brought to him.' Rather than seeing himself as an art 'creator,' Fu considered himself a 'participator.' To me, this approach reflects the practice of nomadic subjects, as it recognizes the participatory role of non-human actors and transcends the traditional dualism between subject and object in art. Moreover, Fu valued affect and sensory experiences in his project. During our walks, we occasionally encountered the dead bodies of seabirds or East Asian finless porpoises, and Fu would stop and bury them in the sand. He did not mind touching the 'waste' with bare hands, stating that 'they've already been disinfected by the sea water.' For him, the sound of the currents, the mix of scents from animal corpses and the sea, and the texture of plastic bags flowing in the ocean for over 30 years were all influential actors shaping both his life and artwork. As

quoted at the beginning of this chapter, he described himself as 'talking, moving, and breathing with waste.'

One question Fu has been exploring is whether his work can have any meaning for the future. Over the years, the waste he collected kept piling up, eventually filling his studio, so from time to time, he had to take some to the recycling center or other waste facilities. He said this was a key reason why he always left the waste as is when he picked it up. He explained:

> I can't help but wonder what to do with my collection. In the end, it won't just disappear, and my ability to deal with it is limited. I know that eventually, it will end up in landfills or incinerators, like all the other waste we produce. That's why I'll never turn it into large installations—doing so would only create more waste and make it harder to sort and process once it's served its 'exhibition purpose' and is discarded.

In our conversation, I tried to interpret Fu's work using assemblage thinking and ANT, but he humbly admitted he wasn't familiar with those theories. Instead, he turned to 'traditional Chinese philosophy,' specifically Daoist thought, to make sense of his connection to the waste and its impact on the future. He articulated the logic behind his project as follows:

> I believe there is a Dao guiding the relationship between humans and the ocean. For me, collecting waste on the beach is my way of following the Dao… Dao doesn't prioritize humans; it emphasizes the equality of all things in the world. I wouldn't say that I 'gave' meanings to this waste—that would be contrary to the Dao. Neither would I say that they 'created' the meanings. Rather, the meanings emerged from our co-existence.

Fu's idea of co-existence is explored through the 'five element theory' (*wuxing*; 五行), a framework that explains the operations and changes within the cosmos. While the relationship between *wuxing* and the Dao has been debated, many have suggested that the interaction and transformation of the five elements reflect how the Dao works (He, 2010). In this framework, the five basic elements—earth, wood, metal, fire, and water—emerge from one another and are linked to the four seasons: 'Water means winter, metal means autumn,

soil means early summer, fire means summer, and wood means spring' (Hou, 1997, p. 484). They are also connected to the human body, which is why traditional Chinese medicine sees the body as interconnected with time and nature (Hsu, 2007). In Fu's studio, he arranged the waste he collected to mirror a diagram showing the interactions between the five elements (Figure 23). In the 'diagram,' mechanical tools such as spanners and wires symbolizing 'metal,' rotten wood, seashells, and animal bones representing 'wood,' plastics that once contained liquids representing 'water,' machine components such as oil tanks and boat engines embodying 'fire,' and lastly, stones and plastic foam, weathered by wind and ocean currents over the years, standing for 'earth.' The diagram shows how human actions have disrupted the natural operation and transformation of the five elements by generating an excess of materials that are difficult to be categorized within the framework. The five elements—whether referring to actual materials in the natural world or symbolically signifying component parts of other cycles in the universe such as seasons and bodily organs—are engaged in a constant cyclical movement and can transition into each other. However, with indissoluble things like plastics, the natural movement and transition come to a halt, consequently impacting the overall functioning of the universe.

The cyclical movement of the five elements, according to Fu, also suggests that waste and all living beings—including humans—are interconnected and mutually constitutive. Even if some waste disrupts the cycle, it will eventually, as Fu puts it, 'form a new cycle and continue to follow the Dao.' No matter how much human society tries to separate itself from waste, it cannot escape the cycle that ultimately brings waste, or wasted matter, back to the human body. Building on this idea, Fu's work serves as a warning that unless we rethink our modes of development, especially the human-centered pursuit of modernity that depends on the continual production of waste, we will inevitably face the consequences, in accordance with the principles of the Dao.

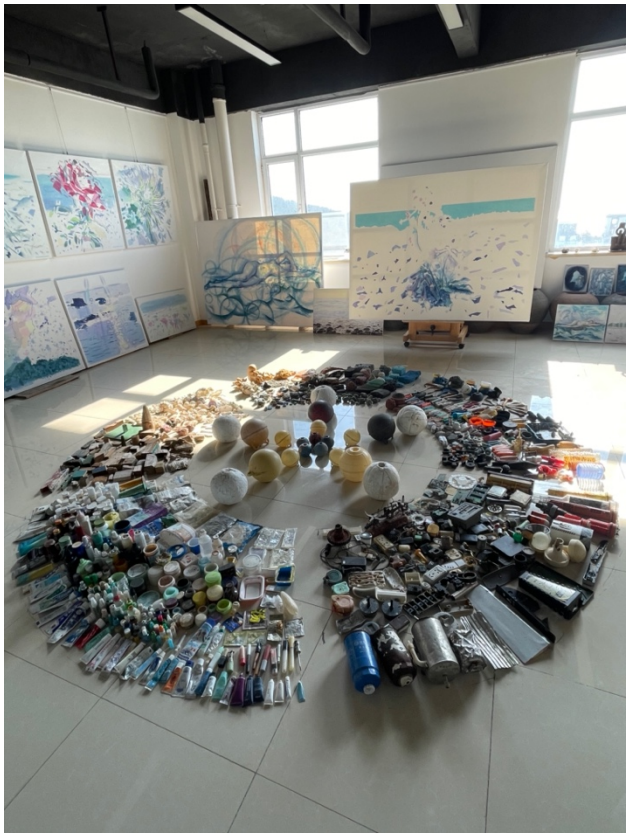

Figure 23. Photo taken at Fu's art studio in November 2023.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how waste shapes cultural practices while broadening our vision of the future. The examples in this chapter provided a lens for re-examining our relationship with waste. Examined through a combination of Actor-Network Theory, assemblage thinking, and traditional Chinese philosophy, these artistic works and practices challenge the anthropocentric view of waste, instead suggesting that waste actively 'participates' in both artistic creation and the rhythms of everyday life. They also prompt us to think about how waste could actually structure the future by showing different ways of living with waste. The questions these works raise, such as where waste goes after it is discarded and how long it persists, prompt us to reconsider how current practices and narratives of waste are rooted in a homogenized, human-centered perception of time. These questions also encourage us to focus more on the 'causes of the problem' rather than just the

‘solutions.’ Rather than relying solely on advanced technologies to improve waste reuse and recycling, it is more important to adopt ways of living and development that minimize waste from the outset.

Chapter 7.

Destinations in flux

As explored in the previous chapter, an important aspect of using a futurological approach to study waste is the question of boundary-making—how waste unsettles the divisions between human and non-human, subject and object, nature and culture. While I have discussed the future as a concept of temporality—shaped by and embedded in ongoing practices of remaking boundaries—I have not yet explored it as a concept of spatiality. As Latour states, 'The fundamental question of the future is no longer posed in terms of time but of space: on which Earth will we live?' (Latour and Ortoli, 2022) Here, Latour challenges the conventional equation of the future with scientific and technological progress, questioning the idea that the future is 'spaceless' and expected to provide inevitable solutions (Latour and Ortoli, 2022). Indeed, in my research and fieldwork, whenever the term 'future' came up, it was never simply treated as a 'spaceless' concept of time. For example, the Republican and socialist narratives around waste, gender, and modernity were tied to visions of a 'strong, modern China'; urban waste workers aspired to buy their own homes in the city; various waste management practices focused on governing communities, neighborhoods, and villages; and artists working with waste wondered where it would ultimately end up. Although abstract, the future is often framed in cultural narratives and everyday life as a specific destination, whether spatial, economic, or value-based.

This chapter draws on Julie Chu's concept of 'the politics of destination' to explore how waste enables a mobile, future-oriented way of life that might otherwise be unattainable in a modernizing, globalizing China. In her study, Chu (2010) uses 'the politics of destination' to describe how people in Fuzhou, a southern Chinese city with the highest rate of US-bound migration, struggle to establish themselves as modern subjects. As she explains,

mobility—the ability to seek better lives elsewhere, particularly in developed countries—is a key trait of 'modern subjects' in post-socialist China. After the economic reforms of 1979, China's spatial-temporal orders gradually shifted from the rural-urban divide of the socialist planned economy to a market-driven system marked by rapid coastal development and stagnation in inland areas (Chu, 2010, p. 4). At the forefront of global trade and economic development, people in coastal regions came to represent the ideal 'modern subject'—mobile, cosmopolitan, and globally connected. Fuzhounese migrants, however, 'reside at a most awkward intersection of these spatial-temporal processes' (Chu, 2010, p. 4). Despite living in coastal areas, most were peasants who had 'long lingered in the stagnant, rural backwaters of a socialist vision of modernity' (Chu, 2010, p. 4). In their struggle to migrate, many faced years of waiting due to various uncertainties, while others had to find alternative routes when their initial plans were blocked. Although they were physically 'immobile' during these long years of waiting and preparation, Fuzhounese migrants experienced a constant sense of displacement. As people in their social circles kept leaving, they remained in a state of being on the move, always packed and ready to go at any moment. This way of 'inhabiting the world in a particular cosmopolitan and future-oriented way' is what Chu refers to as 'the politics of destination' (Chu, 2010, p. 12).

Building on and expanding Chu's approach, I use 'the politics of destination' as a framework to explore both human and non-human movement, in both everyday life and cultural representations. I argue that destinations linked to waste are sites of class, gender, and species struggles and negotiations, pointing to a distant future that feels out of reach. Scholars from various fields have questioned the dominant narrative of a linear, progressive future, showing how it upholds temporal-spatial hierarchies based on 'continued Western hegemony and the universalization of Western institutions' (Collins, 2021, p. 83). For instance, Jack Halberstam (2005) argues that queer subcultures generate alternative

temporalities by 'allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death' (p. 14). The work of Kimberlé Crenshaw (2022), Audre Lorde (2019), and bell hooks (2000) lays the foundation for imagining an intersectional future where identities such as gender, class, race, and sexuality are fully acknowledged and integrated. Donna Haraway (2019), on a different note, guides us to envision a multispecies future that 'entangles myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages—including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus' (p. 160). Building on these scholarly endeavors, this chapter aims to expand the temporal and spatial boundaries of the future by exploring the various manifestations of destination in waste-related narratives and practices.

Beyond class

When it came to the question, 'Where are you going?', most of the urban waste workers I spoke with referred to a state of being rather than a specific place. Among them, Auntie Pu described her ideal state of being as 'living a life like those who benefit from her service.' As a domestic worker and part-time waste picker in Xiamen, Auntie Pu provided cleaning service for clients all over the city. Every morning, she left her small suburban apartment early to make the long commute. It usually took her three to four hours to clean one household. After that, around 5 pm, she would ride her bike home, collecting recyclables along the way. I met Auntie Pu at the 'Oceanic Garden,'[28] where she had worked for two households for years—people she considered 'already like family and friends.' One evening, I ran into her after work—she was carrying two bags of dried red dates and loading her cleaning tools onto her bike. The red dates, along with the plastic bags containing them, were

[28] For more stories that took place in 'Oceanic Garden,' see Chapter 4.

given to Auntie Pu by one of her clients. She grabbed a handful of red dates, handed them to me, and encouraged me to try them, saying:

> They [her clients] bought too many [red dates] from Sam's Club and gave me some. They know my older daughter is pregnant—how nice they are! These are much better than the ones I get at the wet markets. Also, you know the free plastic bags the compound distributed for waste sorting? They [her clients] had so many that they were going to throw them away, but I said I'd take them. They're high-quality bags, after all.

Originally from a village in Henan Province in Northern China, Auntie Pu and her husband moved to Xiamen to 'try their luck' in the 1990s. During their initial years in Xiamen, the couple operated a small recycling shop, and that is when Auntie Pu developed her habit of picking up recyclables. Later, after their older daughter was born, they decided to change jobs to give her 'a better environment to grow up in.' Introduced by a fellow Henan migrant, Auntie Pu secured a job as a cleaner in a kindergarten, while her husband, after receiving some training, began working as a plumber. In the mid-2000s, not long after their older daughter started primary school and their younger daughter was born, the couple bought a second-hand apartment on the outskirts of the city. Even though they were still paying the monthly mortgage when I interviewed Auntie Pu, she spoke with pride and satisfaction about their apartment: 'I was just an uneducated woman, but at that time, I knew two things: first, we needed our own place to settle down, and second, housing prices in Xiamen would only go up. I remember telling my husband, no matter what, we had to grit our teeth and get an apartment. It's better to do it sooner rather than later.'

Auntie Pu described herself as 'a forward-looking person,' though she admitted that lately, she had been 'feeling nostalgic and homesick for no reason.' During her years at the kindergarten, Auntie Pu learned that domestic workers would be in high demand, as young parents found it increasingly difficult to balance their jobs, childcare, and housework. Inspired by this insight, she enrolled in specialized training and became a professional domestic worker, with a focus on house cleaning. This job, as she expected, offered her a

decent income, but it did not relieve her stress and anxiety. With the goal of sending both daughters to college and buying each of them an apartment, Auntie Pu never stopped collecting waste, which she viewed not only as 'a convenient way to earn extra money' but also as 'a means to effectively save money.' Placing the red dates and several rolls of plastic bags labeled 'Household Food Waste' or 'Residual Waste'—both given by her client—into her bicycle basket, she said:

> I've been telling all my clients that if they have extra things that would otherwise be thrown away, they can give them to me. It really bothers me to see good things wasted. But sometimes I feel tired, you know, from being so frugal and working all the time. The big one [her older daughter] is having a baby, which costs a lot, and the little one wants to stay in Shanghai. Shanghai! Isn't Xiamen good enough for her? I went back to Henan this summer. Many relatives and old friends are still there, and their lives seem not bad. I brought back so many apples to Xiamen—when I was a child, apples were the only sweets we had in the village.

Like the Fuzhounese migrants in Chu's research, Auntie Pu has centered her life around the idea of 'destination.' When she was young, Xiamen was her destination, where she believed she and her family could build a better life. After that, having her own apartment became her destination, and she 'literally worked day and night' to make it happen. Now, with those two destinations reached, she still felt unsettled, moving toward new ones—maybe Shanghai, if her daughter decided to stay there, or back home, where she was thinking of building a small house in her village for herself and her husband to live in when they are 'no longer able to work.'

For Auntie Pu, 'the politics of destination' was her way of coping with life's many challenges, but in her words, it was 'the only choice she had.' Holding up the red dates her client had given her, she spoke with admiration for their abundant life:

> Honestly, I'm jealous. I won't lie. Who wouldn't want a life like that—so rich and carefree? But what can I do? All I can do is keep looking ahead, hoping that maybe, just maybe, I'll get a little closer someday. I don't even dare to dream about it. I just wish for the day when I no longer have to worry about the future, even if I stop collecting recyclables.

Auntie Pu explained that the small recyclables business she ran in her free time covered her family's monthly food expenses, so it was something she 'couldn't afford to give up.' Despite this, she had mixed feelings about it. On one hand, it was part of her future-oriented mindset. Through this, she could save more money—not only for her daughters but also for 'future emergencies.' On the other hand, her attachment to waste constantly reminded her of the difficult past she wanted to escape (as mentioned earlier, she switched jobs because she felt it was not decent). She admitted that at times, she felt 'desperate' realizing that even after years of hard work, she still had to make money by collecting waste. While she insisted her recycling business was temporary, she sounded uncertain about when it would end, saying, 'I don't know. I guess you only stop worrying about saving when you're as rich as my clients.' As such, her clients' carefree lifestyle was the 'destination' she aspired to—'an ideal state of being'—but with her deep connection to waste, it seemed both unattainable and out of reach.

Auntie Pu's experience resonated with many urban waste workers whose sense of the future—or, in other words, their expectation of linear progress that hard work will eventually lead to a better life—was disrupted by their attachment to waste. Like Auntie Pu, Lao Tian found himself 'always returning to working with waste.' In his fifties, Lao Tian worked at a waste transfer station in Shanghai. When I met him, he was smoking behind a bush near the station. He looked nervous and cautious when he saw me, quickly trying to hide the half-finished cigarette. Later, he told me that smoking was strictly forbidden at the station, but he and his colleagues did it in secret, covering for each other because it helped them 'take a break and relax.' Lao Tian's main job during the day was to record the amount and type of municipal solid waste brought to the station for processing. Afterward, he would document the treated waste as it was sent out for final disposal. The job itself, as Lao Tian put it, was not too tiring. What stressed him most was the uncertainty of keeping it. Before working at

the waste transfer station, Lao Tian tried various jobs—a taxi driver, a janitor, and even a food stall owner—but none lasted more than two years. The reasons those jobs did not last varied, from his health issues to city-wide COVID-19 quarantines, but Lao Tian preferred not to go into detail. All he kept saying was, 'This is destiny. This is destiny. It seems I'm only meant to deal with waste.'

While Lao Tian was reluctant to discuss the failure of previous jobs, he was open about his past experience in waste management. As Lao Tian remembered, his first job in Shanghai was as a sanitation worker employed by the government. In the 1990s, even though the pay was low, the job was considered stable and thus 'hard to obtain.' Diligent and responsible, Lao Tian was quickly promoted to team leader, a position he held for 13 years before quitting in the mid-2000s. He explained that there were two reasons he quit:

> First and foremost, I didn't see a future in that job. I had no connections, no education, no background—nothing. If I stayed, I would have been a sanitation worker for the rest of my life.
> [...]
> I had always wanted to run my own business. By then, I had some savings, so I used them—along with money borrowed from relatives—to buy a second-hand light bus. My business was transporting passengers between my town and Shanghai. The industry had boomed in the 1990s, and even though it was already saturated by the time I started, I still made more money than I ever expected.

Lao Tian's new career, however, was derailed by his mother's illness, which wiped out almost all his savings and eventually forced him to sell his bus. After his mother's condition improved, the family was left deep in debt. In that situation, Lao Tian could not afford to start his own business again. Unable to find another satisfying job, he ended up going back to work as a waste worker, this time for a private company. Over the next decade, Lao Tian went through this cycle repeatedly—whenever he failed at another job, he returned to working with waste. As he put it, he 'was probably born to work with waste.'

At the waste transfer station, Lao Tian said he had 'accepted his destiny.' In the past, he always believed things would improve in the future, but after all his experiences, he 'no longer thought about the future.' He said:

> I've lived long enough and seen enough to know this: people like us, from the lower class, are better off not thinking about the future. All those videos online, on Douyin, WeChat, and other places, they don't tell the truth. You see videos of a ragpicker becoming a millionaire. Sure, maybe there's one or two, but they're the luckiest of the lucky. Most people like me, it's not that we don't try hard or that we're less smart, but we don't have a safety net. Anything unexpected can easily destroy everything we have.

Although Lao Tian said he no longer thought about the future, he worried that he might lose his job one day, especially with rumors circulating that the station was planning to buy advanced machines that could replace most workers. This left Lao Tian and his colleagues feeling anxious. When asked what he would do if that day came, Lao Tian smiled wryly and sighed, 'I honestly don't know. In the past, I could always go back to working with waste, but if those jobs are gone, I don't know what else I could do.'

The stories of Auntie Pu and Lao Tian illustrate a paradox: both were motivated by 'the politics of destination,' yet both became disillusioned when they realized their destinations were never within reach. The key difference between them and the Fuzhounese migrants was that while the Fuzhounese migrants experienced displacement even without physically moving, Auntie Pu and Lao Tian found themselves trapped in stagnation despite constantly being on the move. This paradox first reflects class immobility—the 'persistent inequality among individuals from different class backgrounds in their chances of reaching a particular class destination' (Li, Chen, and He, 2019, p. 746). Both Auntie Pu and Lao Tian saw waste as a symbol of the lower class, and as long as they worked with it, they believed they were stuck in the same social status. Second, this paradox led to a sense of temporal disorientation, making it difficult for Auntie Pu and Lao Tian to envision a future for themselves. In *Time and the other: how anthropology makes its object*, Johannes Fabian

(2014) introduces the concept of 'denial of coevalness,' where anthropologists and their readers are 'placed in a privileged time frame' (p. ix), while the 'Other(s),' those being studied, are relegated to 'a stage of lesser development' (p. ix). Inequality in power and social class causes people to perceive time differently. In the eyes of Auntie Pu and Lao Tian, the present lives of Auntie Pu's clients, the small business owners Lao Tian envied, or even me as a researcher from a foreign university, represent a future that feels unattainable to them.

Similar allochronic patterns are evident in Hao Jingfang's (郝景芳) short story *Folding Beijing* (北京折叠), highlighting how class division and social inequality are reflected in people's relationships to waste and perceptions of time. The story takes place in a futuristic Beijing where three classes of people share the urban space in a 48-hour cycle: the most privileged class occupies it for 24 hours, the second class for 16 hours, and the third class for only 8 hours. At the end of each class's allotted time, their part of the city folds away, and the spaces for the other classes emerge and expand. For the 50 million residents of the third class—twice the population of the second class and ten times that of the first class—traveling to the upper classes is strictly forbidden. Among the third-class residents, nearly half are waste workers who, 'facing the trash on the conveyer belt flowing [...] like a river' every day, are 'the backbone of Third Space's prosperity' (Hao, 2015).[29] The protagonist, Lao Dao, is one of these waste workers. The story follows his illegal journey to the First Space to deliver a love letter for a graduate student in the Second Space, a task that promises to earn him enough money to pay for his adopted daughter's kindergarten fees.

Although set in an unspecified future, *Folding Beijing*, as Dongmei Ren and Chenmei Xu (2018) point out, 'serves as a strong voice for social critique' (p. 54). By infusing science fiction with realistic concerns—'the everyday concerns that she has witnessed by looking

[29] Quotes from *Folding Beijing* are translated by K. Liu.

around herself in contemporary China' (Lyu, 2021, p. 37)—Hao makes the story a prime example of using ethnography to imagine futures. Meanwhile, the realistic depiction of segregated urban spaces allows me to view the story through an ethnographic lens. The foldable Beijing mirrors the city's current stratification, with Lao Dao and his fellow Third Space residents embodying the '*diceng*' population, often referred to as the 'subaltern.'[30] Lao Dao's father was a construction worker who, along with 80 million others, built the folding city, but once it was completed, 'no more than 20 million were allowed to settle' (Hao, 2015). From today's perspective, this narrative of the migrant construction workers can be seen as foreshadowing the eviction of the so-called 'low-end population' in Beijing in November 2017.[31] Forced out of their homes in areas mostly inhabited by migrant workers, the 'low-end population' was treated like the Third Space residents in the story—both considered 'human waste' that can be easily discarded by society.

Hao does not emphasize the dystopian nature of the Third Space merely through descriptions of the horrible living conditions, poor people, or endless exploitation. By using conversations about the future as a recurring trope to connect different characters, she shows that the dystopia lies not only in the present but also in the limited possibilities people can imagine for the future. If not for the hope of sending his adopted daughter to a better kindergarten that teaches music and dance, so she might one day realize her dream of performing on stage, Lao Dao would not have risked sneaking into the Second and First Spaces. Likewise, without the Second Space graduate student's aspiration of living in the First Space with his loved one, which led him to hire someone to help send a letter, Lao Dao would not have even considered the idea of space travel. It is also through Lao Dao's eyes and ears that we gain insight into the goals of the dominant class. After completing his

[30] For more about the '*diceng*,' see Sun (2014).
[31] For details of the incident, see https://madeinchinajournal.com/2017/11/18/beijing-evicts-low-end-population/.

mission, Lao Dao was caught and taken by an administrative staff member named Lao Ge, who is originally from the Third Space, to a government dinner celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the folding city. At the dinner, Lao Dao overheard a conversation between an elderly man, presumably a government leader, and a young official about automatic waste processing. The elderly man, after hearing the young official's explanation of the benefits of the latest equipment, shook his head and said:

> Things aren't that simple. If I approve your project and it's implemented, there will be major consequences. Your process won't need workers, so what are you going to do with the tens of millions of people who will lose their jobs? (Hao, 2015)

Although Lao Dao only 'understood vaguely' their conversation and 'wasn't sure whether it was good news or bad' (Hao, 2015), he knew it related to his future and later asked Lao Ge for more details. Without receiving answers that he could comprehend, Lao Dao let the issue go and instead chatted with Lao Ge about 'his childhood spent alone wandering at the edge of the landfill' (Hao, 2015). In the end, Lao Dao returned to his home in the Third Space, his legs severely injured during the shift between spaces. Looking at his adopted daughter who had just woken up, he felt a mix of hope and despair: 'he didn't know how long it would take Tangtang [Lao Dao's adopted daughter] to learn to dance and sing, and become an elegant young lady' (Hao, 2015).

Working with waste, Auntie Pu, Lao Tian, and Lao Dao are all oriented by various visions of futures—better lives for their children, families, and clients, and the 'green economy and recycling economy' promised by the state government (Hao, 2015)—but their own futures remain obscure or unimportant to their present lives. Like Lao Dao, who 'had not found the meaning of his existence' and 'continued to hold onto the humble place assigned to him in life' (Hao, 2015), Auntie Pu barely talked about her own future. Devoted to her daughters, she set aside her preferences for how she wanted to live and 'had no time to think about things like retirement.' Similarly, Lao Tian had given up his dream of running a small

business and instead focused on keeping a stable job as a waste worker to provide for his family. The absence of a future tense in their stories emphasizes their marginalization as the 'Other,' excluded from the future determined by the linear logic of capitalist time.

Gendered and multispecies trajectories

In cultural products and everyday representations about waste and class, the denial of coevalness is shown through the erasure of futures for people from lower social classes. Conversely, in narratives addressing the intersection of waste and gender, the allochronic pattern shows up as a rejection of the present. This is firstly because, the male-centric paradigm that links men with hygiene and modernity (see Chapter 2) leaves little room for alternative gendered imaginations of waste. It is only in the future, defined by Sarah Pink, Yoko Akama, and Annie Ferguson (2017) as 'an alterity of the present' (p. 133), that the gendered Other can reclaim their identities by transforming their relationship with waste. Moreover, as Donna Haraway (1991) famously advocates in her cyborg politics, where dualisms and boundaries give way to the 'partial, fluid, sometimes aspect of sex and sexual embodiment' (p. 180), the high-tech future emerges as a possibility for transcending today's oppression. The denial of the present is also reflected in the denial of space and embodiment. Doreen Massey (1994) argues that time must always be considered in relation to space—what she calls 'space-time'—to understand the 'ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification' (p. 3). As one important aspect of those social relations and power dynamics, gender—both in terms of its conceptual nature and embodied experience—are tied up with the construction and conceptualization of 'space-time' (Massey, 1994, p. 2).

I will begin by exploring how using 'the politics of destination' helps us better understand the absence of the female body and voice within the 'space-time' of Wang Jiuliang's (王久良) documentary film *Plastic China*. Filmed over the course of six years,

Plastic China tells the stories of two families working in a plastic waste household-recycling workshop in a suburban village in Shandong, a coastal province in northeastern China. Kun, the owner of the workshop, was ambitious about his career, while his employee, Peng, only longed to move back to his hometown in Southwestern China. Throughout the film, Wang's camera tracks Peng's eldest daughter, the 11-year-old Yi Jie, as she grew up in the dump, taking care of her siblings, playing with the waste, and dreaming of schools and her hometown. Unlike Kun's son, also his only child, who was sent to a kindergarten to gain early literacy trainings, Yi Jie did not have the opportunity to attend any school because of her family's migrant status, meager income, and her father's indifference towards girls' education. The spotlight on Yi Jie, as analyzed by Yvan Schulz (2018), projects the film as 'a mediation on issues of gender inequality' (p. 99).

However, even with Yi Jie as a lead character, the film fails to fully capture women's voices and experiences. Yi Jie is the only female in the film who speaks directly to the camera. The others—such as her mother, Kun's wife, and Kun's mother—are mostly silent. Even when they do speak, they say very little and tend to avoid the camera. In a scene where Yi Jie's mother gives birth to her youngest daughter, the camera captures her sitting behind a grove, with her husband and Kun's mother by her side. Her facial expressions and body language make it clear that she is in intense pain. Although she bites her braids to stifle her cries, the audience hears her heavy breathing at the start of the scene. Moments later, solemn music fades in, drowning out any sounds she might make during labor. The background music then suddenly stops as the newborn baby's cry breaks the silence. As the camera moves closer to the baby, being washed by the father and drawing the attention of the other kids, the mother is left behind, panting and looking weak. Eventually, she fades into the background and becomes out of focus (Wang, 2016, 32:55-33:50). In another scene, Kun talks to the camera about saving money for his son's tuition. As he speaks, the camera pans

across the room, showing his mother and wife quietly sitting and taking care of the child (Wang, 2016, 45:31). This dynamic is repeated in the portrayal of Kun's family, where he is the one who speaks and makes decisions, while the women listen and obey.

In contrast, the film portrays Yi Jie in a different way. Although her father dominates her—slapping her when she watches TV with other kids instead of helping with housework and spending all his money on alcohol rather than sending her to school—Yi Jie does not seem submissive. Instead, she resists in her own way. Having broken his promise to send Yi Jie to school for the past five years, she feels angry with her father. When Kun goes to the school to pick up his son and asks Yi Jie if she wants to go along to have a look, she hesitates to agree because of her father's objection. But when she is alone, she tells the camera, 'I want to go to school. But my dad wouldn't let me, because we don't have money' (Wang, 2016, 18:46). She cries out and yells at her father as he scolds, slaps, and drags her away to stop her from visiting the school, though her cries are again muffled by the film's background music.

In my conversation with Wang, I brought up my confusion about the lack of women's voices in the film. Wang explained:

> You're right—the film doesn't fully capture everything we saw in the area. In fact, around 70% to 80% of the people we met at the landfill were women. During the day, it was common for women to stay home and sort through garbage by hand, while men operated machinery or went out to transport waste. We actually filmed many conversations with women, including Yi Jie's mother and Kun's wife, but those scenes didn't make it into the final cut.

He then discussed the three main reasons those scenes were left out. To begin with, like Yi Jie's mother, many of the women working at the landfill spoke little to no Mandarin. To make their words accessible to a wider Mandarin-speaking audience, translating what they said on camera would require extra time and money. Moreover, even though Kun's wife shouldered major household responsibilities and enjoyed chatting with Wang when her husband was not around, she often resumed a quiet and passive demeanor once Kun returned

home, as Kun wanted to be perceived as the family's leader. Furthermore, given that the documentary primarily focused on the Kun and Peng families, interviews with women outside the two families had to be cut out to maintain a smoother narrative structure.

Wang identified as a feminist and said that he 'unconsciously focuses his camera on women because they tend to be kinder and more approachable.' Nevertheless, despite filming a significant amount of footage that captures women's experiences, opinions, happiness, and pain, he admitted that there was limited space to include it in the final film. In addition to the three reasons mentioned above, Wang noted that the exclusion of that footage was also partly due to a cinematic market that continues to favor patriarchal narratives. He said:

> We were aware from the start of filming that this documentary might not reach a wide audience. For one, it wasn't commercially driven. Additionally, it could face censorship, which is exactly what happened. Because of this, we considered submitting it to foreign film festivals to attract more attention. While that wasn't our main goal in making the film, I'd be lying if I said it never crossed our minds. The issue is that these festivals tend to favor certain narrative patterns, one of them being the victimization of women and children in underdeveloped countries. Although I didn't edit the film to fit these patterns deliberately, I have to admit that all directors are inevitably influenced by these patterns.

In the film, the silence of Yi Jie's mother and Kun's wife portrays them as submissive and ignorant of their oppression. However, Wang noted that in reality, both of them —along with many other women at the landfill site—were well aware of their husbands' problems and unafraid to speak out their concerns when circumstances permitted. The film's focus on their silence is therefore more of a directorial choice rather than a true reflection of the women's more complex experiences at the landfill. Nevertheless, this is not a critique of Wang, who was fully aware of these issues but had to navigate challenges such as limited funding, censorship, and ethical dilemmas while working to complete the film. Instead, by illustrating how the images of women are simplified and flattened in the final version of the documentary, I aim to emphasize the persistent representational mechanism that equates

women with waste—both seen as disposable and devoid of agency. This mechanism operates not only during production but also in the circulation and consumption of cultural works.

While the film's constructed 'space-time' portrays women as absent in the present, they reemerge in the future through Yi Jie. The idea of 'destination' comes up frequently in the film—whether it is Beijing, where Kun hopes to take his son, or Sichuan, where Peng's family longs to return, or other goals like a car and education—things that motivate both families to work hard. These destinations, however, are defined by men. Aside from Yi Jie, the film does not reveal what the women want or where they wish to go. But as Wang put it, his feelings for the women were 'fully expressed through his camera when it followed Yi Jie.' How he filmed Yi Jie reflects how he 'envisions a future for women.' One of Yi Jie's biggest dreams is to go back to her hometown in the mountains of Sichuan. In a scene where Yi Jie calls her grandmother back home on a broken mobile phone, she seems different—happy, lighthearted, and speaking playfully, like a spoiled child—a side of her that she rarely shows in interactions with her parents, siblings, or others at the dump. Amid the crackling voice on the other end, Yi Jie leans in, repeatedly pressing the phone to her ear. When her grandmother says, 'I heard you are coming back, I'm so happy,' Yi Jie holds the phone with both hands, hiding her wide smile as if shy. In the background, the warm sunlight casts a golden glow on the discarded plastics, giving the moment an almost sublime quality (Wang, 2016, 17: 20-17:44). Wang explained that it was only when talking about the future and her hometown that he saw Yi Jie act in a way that felt like she was showing her 'real self.'

Wang said that making this film gave him a 'destination.' The film does not show whether Yi Jie ever realizes her dream of returning to her hometown. In the film, her father takes her to the train and bus stations, only to realize they still cannot afford the tickets. After returning from the stations, feeling disappointed, Yi Jie picks up a stick from the pile of waste and uses it to write three characters on the wall: *shang huo che* (aboard train). Having never

attended school and learning to write from books she found in the waste, Yi Jie does not write beautifully or even correctly, but she does so slowly and carefully (Wang, 2016, 1:11:11-1:11:32). In the final scene with Yi Jie, she lies among the waste, her face emotionless. She says that she is going out to work at 13 years old, and the money she earns will be used for her brothers and sisters to attend school (1:15:49-1:15:58). Wang did not know what would happen to Yi Jie after filming was completed, but he said he 'had known he would want to learn more about her life and would love to make a film about her hometown after hearing her describe it.' Driven by this destination, Wang continued to stay in touch with Yi Jie and her family. Finally, Yi Jie was able to return to Sichuan and attend a local school that did not charge tuition. In 2023, during our interview, Wang mentioned that Yi Jie was doing well and, in her spare time, was helping him film a documentary about girls like her in the mountains. Wang said that this time, with Yi Jie and other women involved, his focus was on 'how women can actively change their situation or even resist in the present,' rather than on 'a vague hope for the future.'

While *Plastic China* and the stories surrounding it reveal how cultural narratives about waste often conform to an allochronic paradigm—where women's resistance in the present is routinely overlooked—Chen Qiufan's (陈楸帆) science fiction novel *The waste tide* (Huangchao; 荒潮) reimagines gender dynamics through different temporal lenses. Set on Silicon Isle, a fictional e-waste dump inspired by Guiyu in Guangdong Province, Southern China,[32] the novel follows Xiaomi, a young female migrant waste worker, who transforms into a cyborg-like fusion of body and machine after being violently raped and buried alive. Although the novel unfolds within a continuous near-future timeframe, Xiaomi's transformation symbolically divides time into one period closer to the present and another

[32] For more about the e-waste recycling town Guiyu, see https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/2112226/chinas-most-notorious-e-waste-dumping-ground-now-cleaner-poorer

that is more distant. Before her transformation, Xiaomi is at the bottom of the social hierarchy on Silicon Isle, oppressed by the local clans that run the waste industries and ignored by her fellow workers. Despite the protection of Chen Kaizong, a well-educated Chinese American accompanying his boss, Scott Brandle, to visit the island to negotiate a contract for a green recycling company, Xiaomi cannot escape the torture inflicted by a gang from one of the clans. The failure of external intervention in local affairs mirrors the reality of contemporary China, and despite its cyberpunk elements, the novel 'maintains continuity with [...] mainstream Chinese literary [...realism]' (Healey, 2017, p. 5). Nevertheless, after Xiaomi transforms into a cyborg with strong will and superpowers, she becomes the 'revived goddess' (Chen, 2013) of the waste people's resistance and leads them to successfully defeat their oppressors. This reversal in female body and gender power creates a temporal gap, making the post-transformation story feel less connected to present reality than the earlier part. The sense of disjunction sharpens, and the reader is pulled back to the present when, toward the end of the novel, Xiaomi, unable to control her hybrid body and split consciousness, begs Kaizong to shoot her.

While Xiaomi's transformation and the waste people's rebellion reflect Chen's critique of contemporary issues like environmental crises, technocracy, and class inequality, the tragic ending of Xiaomi, as Christine Xiong (2021) aptly observes, 'refracts the text's own gender anxieties' (p. 77). After Xiaomi becomes a cyborg-human hybrid, her body is primarily controlled by the cyborg consciousness, Xiaomi 1, while her human self, Xiaomi 0, remains weak and can only surface briefly. Although Xiaomi 0 'admires' Xiaomi 1 for her superhuman intelligence and power, which allow her to take revenge and kill those who oppressed her, she is also 'afraid of Xiaomi 1' and 'cannot understand what Xiaomi 1 is thinking or doing, let alone interfere' (Chen, 2013, p. 154). At the end of the story, after the battle between the waste people and local clans ends with thousands of deaths on both sides,

Kaizong's American boss Brandle takes Xiaomi, seeing her as a 'new species' that will bring him power and profit, ultimately 'ending human history' (Chen, 2013, p. 239). Kaizong and Xiaomi's brother chase Brandle, attempting to rescue Xiaomi, while Brandle threatens to kill her if they do not let him take her. At that moment, Xiaomi 1 re-emerges and kills Brandle before he can harm her. Xiaomi 0, however, is 'sick of killing' (Chen, 2013, p. 246). Although she is happy to be reunited with her lover, Kaizong, she begs him to kill her before Xiaomi 1 returns. At first, Kaizong refuses, but when he sees Xiaomi 1 awaken and gradually take control of Xiaomi's body, he pulls out the gun.

By casting Kaizong as Xiaomi's savior, the ending reinforces the trope of men rescuing women, which weakens the novel's critique of intersectional oppression. In the first half of the novel, Chen devotes many pages to describe how the waste people, especially women like Xiaomi, suffer oppression not only from those in higher social classes but also from men within their own class. Even her own brother forces a discarded machine into her brain, even though it causes her pain and bleeding. In the second half of the novel, Xiaomi's transformation shifts the power dynamics in Guiyu, with Xiaomi 1—the cyborg—becoming the dominant force driven by violence. During this stage, the love-hate relationship between Xiaomi 0 and Xiaomi 1 reveals her inner conflict as she struggles between violence and compassion, strength and vulnerability, and machine and human. This dynamic and complex female character inspires a vision of a future where gender, class, and species inequalities are dismantled. However, the story concludes with a patriarchal narrative that again reduces Xiaomi to an innocent, kind, and powerless victim, who can only find 'freedom' through death—death that must be delivered by a man.

However, the 'Other,' excluded from the present and denied coevalness, should not be restricted to fixed identities. In my conversations with waste activist Zaisheng, he discussed the stereotypes he faces as a man living a sustainable lifestyle. Zaisheng shares tips on

reducing waste on social media and organizes events to promote more eco-friendly lifestyles. He avoids unnecessary plastic products, uses recyclable items like handkerchiefs and cloth bags, and always carries a garbage bag to pick up waste wherever he goes. These habits, however, have caused some of his friends and family members to mock him. He said,

> They thought these behaviors were too feminine. 'What man uses a handkerchief?' they would say. As a result, I barely have any close male friends. Once, I went on a road trip to Xinjiang with several childhood friends. During our trip, we passed a grassland with a small pile of waste, likely left by tourists. I asked if we could stop to pick it up, but no one agreed. Instead, they made fun of me, calling me an idealist. Most of my social media followers and event volunteers are women. I don't understand how these gender biases started, but I hope that one day men can be as environmentally conscious as women, and men like me won't be shamed for wanting to pick up waste (Zaisheng, 2024).

This experience inspired Zaisheng to create a series of posters showing himself doing environmental activities. In designing the posters, he used artificial intelligence to layer several images, which explains why his body looks incongruous with the background. The incongruity of the images, according to Zaisheng, represents the 'out-of-sync feeling' that he experiences in his daily efforts to reduce waste and protect the environment. As he noted, 'All the background images are real—the nature, the waste, the subway—and I am real, too—I, the man who wants to ride bikes and collect waste. But when you combine me with the background, it looks strange and out of place to some people, as if I shouldn't belong in those scenes' (Zaisheng, 2024). Using artificial intelligence is another way for Zaisheng to 'challenge the stereotypes.' Before making these posters, he used artificial intelligence software to create images of people picking up waste in various situations. To his surprise, most of the AI-generated images featured women unless he specifically requested male characters. 'To us ordinary people, AI is usually associated with the future,' Zaisheng said. 'This was scary because it made me realize that even in the future, I am still alone.' By foregrounding himself in the posters, Zaisheng therefore envisions a future free from the gender biases prevalent in waste narratives.

As illustrated by the stories of Auntie Pu and Zaisheng, as well as in *Folding Beijing* and *Waste tide*, waste shapes both people's identities and their visions of the future. However, artist Fu Junsheng's earlier question about what his collections of waste will become in a hundred years suggests that the future does not belong solely to humans. Or, as depicted in *Waste tide*, the future compels us to redefine the boundaries between humans, machines, waste, and other living and non-living entities. In her analysis of twenty-first-century technoculture, Haraway (2008) uses the term 'tangled species' to describe the ongoing, dynamic, and heterogeneous 'infolding of others to one another' (p. 249-250). In contrast to the human-centered linear narrative of societal development, Haraway (2008) envisions the future as characterized by the continual formation and transformation of compounds made up of 'diverse agents for directing and multiplying relational action' (p. 250). Just as waste has significantly reconfigured the earth's landscapes and human and non-human embodiment in the past and present, it will continue to shape future interactions between species.

Chi Hui's sci-fi short story *The legacies of humanity* (*Renlei de yichan*; 人类的遗产) can be interpreted as a response to Haraway's concept of 'tangled species' through its depiction of a future defined not by humans, but by waste, animals, and micromaterials. The story follows the evolution of a new continent called 'Rubbilia'—named after the English word 'rubbish'—which is a floating landmass made entirely of waste. After humans become extinct, new intelligent life forms begin to appear on 'Rubbilia,' and they call themselves 'Rubbiter.' Born from radioactive waste piles, each 'Rubbiter' has millions of toxic elements in their body, with 'small, weak claws like those of a mouse and tails that split into two, resembling snake tongues' (Chi, 2010). The 'Rubbiters' live on 'Rubbilia' for a long time until the land is destroyed by a massive underwater volcanic eruption. While the disaster does not wipe out the 'Rubbiters' entirely—a small number survive and settle on other

continents—it does erase ‘the last trace of humans on this planet’ as the waste that forms ‘Rubbilia’ is humanity’s final legacy (Chi, 2010). By imagining a future of ‘tangled species,’ where humans are merely one element among diverse organisms and materials, Chi’s short story directs us toward a non-anthropocentric perspective on time and change.

Conclusion

Drawing on the concept of ‘the politics of destination,’ this chapter examines how waste creates possibilities for a mobile, future-oriented way of life that might not be accessible within the dominant frameworks of a modernizing, globalizing China. Analyzing both human and non-human movement, in both real and fictional contexts, it contends that waste-related destinations function as critical sites of struggle and negotiation, where class, gender, and species dynamics are contested and redefined. In doing so, this chapter seeks to broaden the temporal and spatial horizons of the future by examining the diverse manifestations of destination in waste-related narratives and practices.

Conclusion

The main objective of this thesis is to explore how waste—one of the most ordinary yet often overlooked aspects of daily life—plays a crucial role in shaping both individual and collective experiences of modern life, as well as the ways modernity is perceived and constructed. While the thesis arises from a desire to explore how we might respond to the growing environmental crisis caused by the global rise in municipal solid waste, it emphasizes that the issue cannot be fully understood or resolved through scientific and technological approaches alone. Drawing on a diverse range of textual, visual, and audio materials from the early twentieth century to the present, along with eight months of ethnographic research in both urban and rural China, this study shows that waste—and how it is defined, perceived, and managed—is informed by broader systems of meaning and practice, while also reflecting deeper sociocultural dynamics throughout China's long process of modernization. My main argument is that the ambiguity and liminality of waste— both in its materiality and its cultural meanings—make it a site where the fractures of modernity unfold. Tracing the cultural history of waste, this thesis finds that although its material forms vary across different times and places, waste consistently prompts reflection, debate, and action around questions of categorization and value. Just as the way a society manages waste reflects its values—what is considered worth keeping and what is discarded—everyday narratives and practices surrounding waste reveal what has been privileged and what has been marginalized in China's pursuit of modernity. By employing gender as a theoretical framework to analyze stories of waste, my thesis aims to illuminate perspectives, experiences, and identities that have long been marginalized or overlooked.

To bring together my arguments on how waste can provoke actions and representations that foreground marginalized communities, forgotten histories, and

overlooked voices—as a means of critiquing the Party-state's triumphant narrative of 'green modernization,' which envisions China achieving 'overall green development' and 'upholding the harmonious coexistence between man and nature' (Hu, Zhou, and Xie, 2025, p. 173)—I wish to return to the three central research questions introduced at the beginning of this thesis: i) how has waste been represented, imagined, managed, and experienced in modern and contemporary China, ii) what do these everyday representations and practices of waste reveal about overlooked aspects of China's modernization, and by shedding light on these overlooked aspects, iii) how can waste help us find ways of life that better tackle today's environmental and social challenges?

How has waste been represented, imagined, managed, and experienced in modern and contemporary China?

As my thesis has demonstrated, cultural representations of waste are deeply connected to the everyday practices and systems through which it is managed. Given that realism, however ambiguously defined, has played a significant role in shaping Chinese cultural production since the early twentieth century, literature, art, documentary film, and other media often take inspiration from real-world interactions with waste, making it a primary site where the lines between fiction and non-fiction are left ambiguous(Anderson, 1990). The limitations of textual and visual representations in conveying the sensory experiences evoked by waste—such as smell, sound, and touch—make it necessary to consider both its symbolic and the material aspects to fully understand how waste tells stories of modernity. Accordingly, in examining the meanings and symbolic representations of waste in both historical sources and contemporary literary and artistic works, I contextualize them within the historical and social conditions that produced and informed their construction. At the same time, when analyzing the empirical materials gathered during my fieldwork, I focus not

only on the ‘facts’ or ‘evidence’ related to everyday waste narratives and practices, but also on how these narratives and practices produce, mediate, and circulate meaning. In doing so, this thesis shows how waste shapes our experiences of modernity in both embodied and discursive ways. In what follows, I will summarize three key patterns in how waste has been represented and managed from the early twentieth century to the present.

First, my thesis shows that although both the Republican and Communist governments have introduced waste management policies at different points in history as part of China’s modernization efforts, public attitudes, behaviors, and creative narratives around waste have never been fully constrained by these state agendas. Instead, they are complex and often contradictory, reflecting how ordinary people negotiate and imagine their own visions of modernity. As Chapter 1 demonstrates, in the Republican era, poor public hygiene and ineffective waste management were seen by many—including government officials and intellectuals—as markers of China’s weakness and lack of progress. As a result, it was common in literary works, newspapers, and magazines to compare everything Chinese—from the people to the social problems the nation faced—to waste, with the implication that they either needed to be rejuvenated or removed. However, not everyone viewed the problem of waste solely through the lens of nationalist aspirations for struggle and improvement. Some writers and editors used the idea of waste to deviate from the dominant nationalist narrative framework. By labeling their own work as ‘waste,’ they strategically avoided criticism and censorship, creating space to explore more diverse perspectives on modern identity and society. During the socialist period, public discourse around waste continued to center on nation-building, with ‘waste’ referring to anything—or anyone—seen as a threat to the socialist regime, from germs and excrement to printed materials classified as ‘anti-socialist.’ The media frequently featured devoted proletarian workers participating in nationwide hygiene campaigns to combat waste— an iconic image that, nonetheless, failed to capture the

diverse and complex realities of people's experiences with waste. Despite the Party's tight control over the media and its suppression of so-called 'feudal, capitalist, or revisionist waste' (Song, 2005), people still pursued personal and artistic freedom—secretly taking discarded books and continuing to make art from waste materials (Chapter 1 and 2). Today, although the social, economic, and political conditions have changed since the Republican and socialist eras, waste remains a contested site of power. This is reflected in how neighborhood waste management sparks differing opinions—and sometimes conflicts—among government officials, activists, and residents, making it harder to implement waste policies effectively (Chapter 3 and 5). Moreover, cultural representations of waste often expose environmental degradation and the social inequalities experienced by those who live or work with waste (Chapters 4, 6, and 7), which starkly contrasts with government propaganda posters that depict waste management as fostering happy families, a clean environment, and a harmonious society (Chapter 3).

The second recurring pattern in narratives and practices surrounding waste across different historical periods, as my thesis argues, is that they are shaped by and embed gendered norms and assumptions. Across newspapers, magazines, literary and artistic works, and street posters, female bodies, desires, and emotions are repeatedly linked to 'waste'—treated as worthless and disposable—while men are depicted as the ones who hold the power to define what counts as waste. In the Republican era, while women often appeared in public discourses on waste, they did so in stereotypical roles—either as clean, responsible housewives who played a key role in managing household waste to support national modernization, or as figures of 'moral decline,' such as dance hostesses and prostitutes—both defined by male-centered values that objectified and categorized women (Chapter 2). In both the socialist period and today, women's roles in representations related to waste remain rooted in stereotypes. The socialist-era 'masculinized female worker' and the contemporary

‘happy woman’ —both common figures in propaganda posters—are portrayed as responsible for managing household and neighborhood waste. However, these representations serve to promote Party policies and ideology, while reinforcing traditional gender roles and patrilineal values, rather than reflecting women’s real experiences and views on waste (Chapter 2 and 3). Women’s voices are also overlooked in the everyday handling and management of waste.

Based on interviews with 26 waste workers in Shanghai and Xiamen, I found that both men and women face the challenge of ‘living in between’—uncertain whether they belong to the formal or informal sector, whether they should continue working with waste to support their families or pursue a different life, and whether they are recognized as part of the waste management system or excluded from it. However, women experience this sense of liminality more acutely due to their additional responsibilities for housework and childcare (Chapter 4). Furthermore, my fieldwork in two villages in Zhejiang Province reveals that, although local officials often treat waste management as a ‘women’s task’ and assign it to female officials, this role tends to diminish rather than strengthen women’s political power and status within local governance. Waste management—particularly waste sorting—is viewed as less profitable and less politically rewarding in the short term than projects like tourism or farm markets. Because of this, even though female officials invest considerable time and effort in these tasks, they face greater obstacles to advancing their political careers. Additionally, this way of using gender as ‘a technique of governance’ (Griffin, 2015) reinforces the longstanding bias that links women more closely to waste (Chapter 5).

Third, I contend that waste shapes our everyday lives in deeply sensory and embodied ways, as revealed not only through my fieldwork but also in literary and artistic works. Since the early twentieth century, cultural representations have often highlighted the sensory aspects of everyday encounters with waste—for instance, the shouts of waste collectors and the rumble of their carts shaping urban routines in the Republican era, or the patriotic songs

played during collective cleaning campaigns in the socialist era, which helped foster a feeling of social unity (Chapter 3). The historical contexts provided by these examples help illuminate how post-socialist waste management continues to operate through sensory governance, and how contemporary literature and art explore new ways of engaging with the sensory experience of waste. By examining how waste sorting was implemented in Shanghai and Xiamen through measures that shaped residents' sensory experiences—such as setting fixed times for trash disposal and using loudspeakers to issue warnings—I show that urban neighborhood governance is often carried out or reinforced through the creation of a 'waste-scape,' a term I argue refers not only to physical spaces marked by waste, but also to the everyday atmosphere it generates (Chapter 3). In resonance with everyday practices, literature and art also emphasize how waste affects the senses of creators and audiences. In particular, my conversation with artist Fu Junsheng demonstrates how his multisensory engagement with seashore waste shapes his perception of time (Chapter 6), and my interview with director Wang Jiuliang underscores the challenges of capturing the full sensory reality of landfill life through film (Chapter 7).

What do these everyday representations and practices of waste reveal about overlooked aspects of China's modernization?

As my findings in response to the first research question show, since the early twentieth century, the ways waste is represented have been closely linked to how it is managed and experienced. Together, these dimensions reflect the multiple—and sometimes conflicting—visions of modern life, which are embedded with gendered assumptions, and foreground the sensory aspects of waste. To answer my second research question, I have delved into each of the three key patterns mentioned above to explore how they uncover

narratives that are often overlooked—both in the Party-led mainstream discourse on China's modernization and in academic studies of waste and Chinese modernity.

Since the early twentieth century, Chinese governments and elites have equated modernization—or modernity—with progress, development, and national wealth and power (Fung, 2010). When promoting modernization—or launching projects to modernize the country—through public media, the governments and elites have tended to exclude elements that are not seen as progressive or as contributing to national development. As a result, stories about waste are often erased or forgotten, since—aside from those that celebrate the government's management—most focus on old things, marginalized people, and dissenting perspectives, all of which are seen as 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 1966). The goal of my thesis is to bring some of these stories to light, not only because they deepen our understanding of our relationship with waste, but also because they offer counter-voices to the hegemonic drive for development and modernization, which has sometimes come at the expense of certain people, living beings, things, and perspectives.

As I have argued, waste inspires cultural narratives that imagine identities alternative or resistant to the patriotic and progressive ideal of the 'modern subject.' Building on this, Chapters 3, 4, and 5 further examine how waste reshapes people's sense of identity, enables new forms of mobility, and challenges and redefines values in everyday life. In these chapters, I trace the stories and memories of marginalized groups—elderly residents of Lao Ximen, a historic Shanghai neighborhood soon to be demolished under the city's renovation plan; waste workers whose vital roles in neighborhood governance remain largely invisible in both public discourse and scholarly research; and migrant workers in textile factories in rural Zhejiang, for whom the local waste management facilities and campaigns represented a vision of the 'modern world' that remained out of reach. I also examine the individual perspectives of activists and volunteers to show how their movement to the countryside to

work with waste—whether by assisting villagers with sorting or organizing waste-picking events— reveals the complex realities of modern life, as they navigated the pressures of urban living alongside aspirations for upward mobility.

My analysis of these often-overlooked dimensions of China's modernization is informed by a gendered perspective. By exploring texts and ethnographic moments that challenge the patrilineal, male-centered logics embedded in everyday discourses and practices of waste, my thesis argues that while waste and its representations often reinforce gendered oppression, they also create spaces for resistance. In addition, my experience of searching for sources and rescuing them from disposal at libraries and second-hand bookshops (Chapter 2), combined with my interview with Director Wang Jiuliang about the unused footage of women at the dump—which was ultimately left out of his film *Plastic China* for various reasons (Chapter 7)—suggests that picking 'waste,' both literally and symbolically, is an act of performing gender.

How can waste help us find ways of life that better tackle today's environmental and social challenges?

To answer this question, I take a futurological perspective to reflect on the key challenges explored in this thesis: gendered oppression, the marginalization of individual voices, inconsistent governance, and the overregulation of sensory experience. While the thesis does not aim to offer specific policy recommendations or direct interventions in waste management, it seeks to draw attention to ideas and practices that might contribute to imagining a future where environmental and social problems related to waste can be addressed more effectively. By exploring contemporary artistic and literary practices, alongside ethnographic accounts that prompt future-oriented ways of thinking about and interacting with waste, I argue that combining Daoist philosophy with theoretical frameworks that emphasize non-human agency and assemblages—such as actor-network theory and

feminist new materialism—can help envision a more inclusive and pluralistic approach to modernization.

Unlike state-led modernization discourses and projects that focus on human control over waste, the artistic and literary works discussed in Chapters 6 and 7 illustrate how waste intervenes in and directs everyday behavior and cultural expression. Inspired by artist Fu Junsheng's idea of waste as a 'living being' that not only co-created his artworks but also transformed his way of life, I suggest viewing cultural works about waste as assemblages composed of human and non-human actors and the dynamic relationships between them. In other words, when analyzing cultural works—and, more broadly, any representation of waste—we should consider not only the symbolic meanings they convey, but also factors such as the materials used, the conditions under which they are produced, how audiences respond to them, and how these elements interact with one another. In doing so, we can more readily uncover the underlying power dynamics that shape waste narratives and remain mindful of the many marginalized and overlooked actors involved.

Engaging with Daoist thinking—also inspired by Fu—offers another way to rethink our relationship with waste. In state-led modernization discourse, time is understood as linear, moving inevitably toward progress and development. However, Fu's work, which links waste from different time periods to natural elements in constant cyclical motion, challenges the notion of linear progress by showing that different temporalities exist in ongoing, interconnected relationships. For example, waste discarded decades ago does not simply disappear; rather, it follows its own life cycles and movements, and returns to us through the cyclical exchange of natural elements—what Fu described as the workings of the Dao (Chapter 6). While the Chinese government has drawn on ancient Chinese philosophies, including Daoist thought, to support its vision of 'green modernization'—which emphasizes harmony between humans and nature (Hu, Zhou, and Xie, 2025, p. 173)—its policies remain

rooted in human-centered management of the natural world. One example is the common belief that environmental problems caused by growing waste can best be addressed through technological advances in recycling and reuse. Yet, as the artistic works discussed in Chapter 6 illustrate, waste is not simply a byproduct of human activity that can be eliminated, but something with its own enduring presence and impact. Therefore, instead of focusing solely on technological solutions to environmental problems—which often reinforce an anthropocentric divide between nature and culture, and between human and non-human—my thesis calls for a rethinking of how we live and develop, toward a more interconnected and relational way of being.

Waste also disrupts the linear modernist framework by challenging the illusion of a 'spaceless' future. Western modernization theory traditionally assumes that modern institutions and ideas can develop independently of place or context—a notion of 'spaceless' progress (Baban, 2017). Similarly, the Chinese state narrative promotes a vision of a prosperous future as universally 'shared' (Sharaf, 2025). However, this future—though framed as attainable by all and full of limitless promise— rests on systems of categorization and exclusion. As seen in my ethnographic work with waste workers and activists, and in science fiction such as Hao Jingfang's *Folding Beijing*, Chen Qiufan's *The waste tide*, and Chi Hui's *The legacies of humanity*, futures linked to waste are sites of class, gender, and species struggles and negotiations—and often feel out of reach (Chapter 7). Even so, my goal is to make these marginalized visions of the future visible, for as long as they are remembered and people keep working toward them, they have a chance to become real.

The scholarly contribution of this thesis

Empirically, my study contributes to the growing body of research on waste in the Chinese context by shedding light on aspects that have received less attention in existing

scholarship. First, by focusing on the stories of a more diverse group of people whose everyday lives and work are connected to waste, including waste workers in both public and private sectors, rural and urban residents, activists, volunteers, and government officials, my thesis extends anthropological inquiry into how waste reflects the underlying social and political tensions in China's modernization. In addition, by exploring how waste evokes sensory experiences, personal and collective emotions, and memories, my research shows that the significance of studying waste goes beyond exposing the darker sides of Chinese society, politics, or modernity. More importantly, it offers a way to critically rethink the systems of value that shape daily life and social meaning in China. Furthermore, my thesis broadens existing scholarship that tends to focus on a specific time and space by showing that contemporary representations and practices of waste can only be fully understood in relation to their historical contexts. At the same time, adopting a futurological perspective and including the countryside as a field site enabled richer, more diverse narratives and lived experiences around waste, which are essential for understanding the varied visions and realities of modernity.

Theoretically, this thesis contributes to existing scholarship on waste and modernity by using gender as a key analytical lens. While scholars have explored the connections between waste, gender, and modernity, my thesis advances the discussion by demonstrating that gender is not merely an additional factor to be considered, but a foundational framework through which waste and modernity are constructed. On one hand, gender theories—as critical ways of knowing and living in the world—challenge established knowledge systems, offering valuable tools for waste studies to examine the intersectional power structures and social classifications that govern society. On the other hand, applying gender theories deepens our understanding of waste in relation to modernity by showing that waste is not merely a byproduct of modern life, but an active force in constituting it—and that it structures

our embodied, everyday experiences rather than simply representing them. The agentic power of waste—its role in 'co-creating' meaning—encourages us to further examine how materiality and social construction are mutually constituted.

I also hope that this thesis can be of practical value. During my fieldwork, I met activists, artists, journalists, and scholars who shared my interest in uncovering the often-hidden stories surrounding waste. Some of them hoped to share their work more widely to raise public awareness about the social and environmental issues related to waste, while others aimed to report the stories they had gathered in hopes that media attention might help address injustice or improve difficult conditions. I would be glad to work alongside them and apply my research in ways that support socially engaged practice.

Limitations of study and questions for future research

My data collection was constrained by the COVID-19 pandemic and the limited duration of the project. Because of travel restrictions, my fieldwork was delayed and limited to Shanghai, Xiamen, Zhejiang, and Shandong. As a result, my ethnographic findings are drawn from these areas which, while representative for exploring my research questions, do not fully capture how people engage with waste across other regions of China. Similarly, the textual and visual sources in this thesis are not comprehensive and reflect a degree of randomness, as some were discovered by chance during my fieldwork. Nevertheless, as many scholars have noted, the goal of ethnography and cultural studies is not to simplify or generalize, but to 'describe the apparently messy and complex activities that make up social action' (Blommaert and Jie, 2010, p. 11-12). I hope that, at the very least, this thesis can help deepen our understanding of the complex, layered, and ever-changing realities associated with waste.

As I have acknowledged, this project does not aim to provide specific practical solutions to the challenges of waste management in China, but it has the potential to inform future research that more directly addresses those issues. For example, in light of the gender imbalance within NGOs working in waste management, where most volunteers are women, it would be worthwhile to conduct fieldwork-based research to investigate the reasons behind this dynamic and explore potential solutions. Alternatively, it may be meaningful to explore how partnerships between waste workers, government agencies, and NGOs could lead to improved rights and working conditions for waste workers. Moreover, broadening the scope of research to include comparative studies—both between regions within China and between China and other countries—may provide valuable insights into global waste issues. As works like Wang Jiuliang's *Plastic China*, Fu Junsheng's art on coastal waste, and many others have shown, waste moves across borders and links people, societies, and cultures in ways that are intricately entangled with global power dynamics. Therefore, I view this thesis as merely the beginning of a deeper journey into the wider, more complex networks that drive the transnational movement of waste.

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Appendices

Information sheet (English)

Participant Information Sheet[33]

Research Project Title:

Waste and Everyday Life in Contemporary China

You are being invited to take part in a research project developed by Shiqin Zhang, a PhD candidate at the University of Sheffield, UK. Before you decide whether or not to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

What is the project's purpose?

What comes to mind first when you hear the word 'waste'? How does waste—no matter what it means to you—influence your everyday life? We are living in a world where million tonnes of waste are produced every day. No matter where you are, what kind of job and lifestyle you have, inevitably, waste is one of the things that you have to face. But waste is more than the things we want to throw away. It tells the stories of our relationships with goods, the society, and the environment. It also shows our identities, family history, or even culture. The ways in which we talk about, deal with, and represent waste form an important part of our culture. This project is interested in your 'waste stories.' By collecting your opinions and experience, this project aims to show the rest of the world a unique part of modern and contemporary Chinese culture and society through the lens of waste.

Why have I been chosen?

Shanghai and Xiamen were the first cities where garbage sorting rules were implemented, which makes them perfect places to dig out interesting stories. This project starts with neighborhoods, the most familiar space that bridges our private and public lives. You are being invited because you are [insert role] of [insert name of neighbourhood]. Your participation would be invaluable to this project.

[33] The design and wording of this information sheet are to encourage a prospective participant to read it in full and to easily understand it in the Chinese context. The format and language may later be slightly adapted to fit different audience' literacy and reading habits in the field.

[Village name] is one of the pioneers of rural waste management in China. It is important that more people outside Zhejiang, or even China, know about your stories. You are being invited because you are [insert role]. Your participation would be invaluable to this project.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. You do not have to give a reason. If you wish to withdraw from the research, please contact [insert contact information].

Please note that participation in this research does not constitute a legally binding agreement, nor does it establish an employment relationship between the researcher and the University of Sheffield.

What will happen to me if I take part? What do I have to do?

Your participation will last [insert time][34]. Should you permit, I will observe your work and daily activities. On occasion, I will interview you. The interview topics will primarily be about the work/activities that you are doing, your experience of producing/dumping/dealing with waste, your opinions on such experience, etc.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

This project does not intend to posit any threat of harm or distress to participants. However, if any part of the research makes you feel uncomfortable, stressed, or unsafe, please note that you have the right to withdraw from it at any time.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Unfortunately, this project will not provide participants with financial benefits. However, I am more than willing to answer any questions you might have about this project, myself, and my life abroad. I would also love to invite you for a cup of coffee or bubble tea at your convenience.

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information that we collect about you during the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications unless you have given your explicit consent for this. If you agree to me sharing the information you provide with other researchers, or with a wider public audience, your personal details will not be included unless you explicitly request this.

[34] This depends on the participant's role and availability. For example, it may only take several minutes to chat with a neighborhood resident, while the NGO founder's participation may last for months.

What will happen to the data collected, and the results of the research project?

Due to the nature of this research, it is very likely that other researchers may find the data collected to be useful in answering future research questions. We will ask for your explicit consent for your data to be shared.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The research is funded by the British Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Who is the Data Controller?

The [University of Sheffield/other] will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that [the University/other] is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield's Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by School of East Asian Studies.

What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research or report a concern or incident?

If you are dissatisfied with any aspect of the research and wish to make a complaint, please contact [NAME; CONTACT DETAILS] in the first instance.

Contact for further information

Primary Contact: Shiqin Zhang; szhang158@sheffield.ac.uk

Secondary Contact: Dr Jamie Coates; j.coates@sheffield.ac.uk

Thank you for your time and consideration!

Information sheet (Chinese)

参与者信息书

您好，我是英国谢菲尔德大学的一名博士生，首先非常感谢您接受我的邀请。在您决定是否参与本项研究之前，请仔细阅读以下事项。一切与本研究相关的活动都是基于自愿的原则，您有权随时退出。如有疑问，欢迎向本人提出。

研究课题：《垃圾与生活》

研究目的：

听闻‘垃圾’二字，您的第一反应是什么？垃圾对您来说意味着什么， 它对您的生活有哪些影响？我们生活的这个世界，每天都能产生成千上万吨垃圾。无论您生活在哪里、从事什么职业， 垃圾都是您生活中不可分割的一部分。但您是否想过，垃圾不仅仅是那些被我们丢弃的东西，它还承载着我们每个人与商品、环境、社会的关系。垃圾堆里，可寻见的不仅是废物，还有我们的故事，那些逐渐被我们遗忘与忽视的，关于身份、家庭、文化的记忆。本研究旨在收集普通人关于垃圾的故事。我相信，这些故事能帮助人们更好地理解当代中国社会与文化，以及我们与这个时代、星球错综复杂的联系。

研究人群：

上海与厦门是中国最早实行“垃圾分类”政策的城市，而其庞大的人口、多元包容的氛围无时无刻不在孕育着有趣的故事。在这两座城市中，社区成为连接每个家庭与社会的载体，也是我们每日产生垃圾从私人空间流向公共空间的必经之地。作为[小区/社区名称]的一员，您的参与将为本次研究带来巨大的帮助。

[村庄名称]是中国乡村垃圾分类的先驱。作为[村庄名称]的一员，您的参与将为本次研究带来巨大的帮助。

自愿原则：

本研究完全基于自愿原则，任何人无法影响您在研究任一阶段所做的决定。即便决定参与，您也可以在任何时候选择终止与退出。如需退出，请联系[联系方式]。

如您同意参与本次研究，您将得以保留本信息书，同时还需签订知情同意书，但这并不代表您与研究者、英国谢菲尔德大学之间具有任何法律意义上的雇佣关系。

参与流程：

在您准许的条件下，我将陪同并观察您日常生活中与垃圾相关的活动，期间或有访谈与图片拍摄。访谈话题将主要聚焦您对当下垃圾制造、处理方式的看法，您个人与垃圾相关的经历等。

参与本次研究的风险与好处：

理论上，本次研究不会给您带来任何生理或心理上的伤害，但假若您在研究的任一阶段感到不适或不安，您有权随时退出，无需提供任何解释。

十分抱歉本次研究无法给您提供任何经济回馈，但我很愿意回答您任何关于研究、我本人，以及其他方面的问题。若条件允许，我也期待与您边喝咖啡奶茶边聊天。

保密原则：

本研究将遵循严格的匿名与保密原则。在未经您允许的情况下，任何涉及您私人信息的访谈、照片、视频等资料都不会以任何形式公开，并将及时销毁。 如您允许部分或全部资料以学术发表、媒体文章等形式呈现，您有权在信息公开的各个阶段进行监督。

后期信息处理：

本次研究所获取的信息将由英国谢菲尔德大学与[合作方名称]保存。由于本研究具有一定人文社会意义，研究过程中产生的影像、访谈稿等资料将为后续研究做贡献。倘若您提供的信息需要以这些形式分享，本人务必会提前征得您同意。

投诉渠道：

如您对本次研究有任何不满，可联系[联系方式]进行投诉。

联系人：

章诗沁: szhang158@sheffield.ac.uk

Jamie Coates 教授 : j.coates@sheffield.ac.uk

再次感谢您抽出宝贵的时间阅读本信息书，我们期待您的参与！

Consent form (English)

Please tick the appropriate boxes	**Yes**	**No**
Taking Part in the Project		
I have read and understood the project information sheet dated DD/MM/YYYY or the project has been fully explained to me. (If you will answer No to this question, please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)	☐	☐
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	☐	☐
I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include being observed, being interviewed, and being recorded (audio and video).	☐	☐
I understand that by choosing to participate as a volunteer in this research, this does not create a legally binding agreement nor is it intended to create an employment relationship with the University of Sheffield.	☐	☐
I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time; I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.	☐	☐
How my information will be used during and after the project		
I understand my personal details such as name, phone number, address and email address etc. will not be revealed to people outside the project.	☐	☐
I understand and agree that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that I will not be named in these outputs unless I specifically request this.	☐	☐
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	☐	☐
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers may use my data in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	☐	☐
I give permission for the [specify the data] that I provide to be deposited in [name of data repository] so it can be used for future research and learning	☐	☐
So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers		
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.	☐	☐

Name of participant [printed] Signature Date

Name of Researcher [printed] Signature Date

Consent form (Chinese)

如果您同意参与本次调查研究，请在下面的表格打勾、签字。

	是	否
我已阅读并理解本次研究的目的、流程，以及原则。	☐	☐
有关本次研究的疑问已得到解答。	☐	☐
我同意参与本次研究，并同意在研究中被拍摄、采访、录音。	☐	☐
我理解本次研究基于自愿原则，本同意书非法律意义上的雇佣合同。	☐	☐
我理解与研究相关的一切活动均为自愿，我可以随时退出。	☐	☐
关于调研结果的使用		
我理解任何涉及隐私的信息（姓名、联系方式、住址等）都将受到保护，未经允许不会以任何形式公开。	☐	☐
我理解并同意调研结果以学术发表、媒体文章、纪录片等形式公开。若无特殊要求，均采用匿名。	☐	☐
我理解并同意其他研究者在被授权以及遵守保密原则的前提下，可以获取本次研究结果。	☐	☐
我理解并同意其他研究者在被授权以及遵守保密原则的前提下，可以使用本次研究结果。	☐	☐
我允许本次研究结果保存在***数据库，以便日后研究使用。	☐	☐
以确保您提供的宝贵信息可以被合法使用。		
我同意我所提供信息、资料的版权归属于英国谢菲尔德大学。	☐	☐

签字（参与人）　　日期

签字（研究者）　　日期

Research ethics approval letter

Downloaded: 11/07/2025
Approved: 25/07/2022

Shiqin Zhang
Registration number: 210117967
School of East Asian Studies
Programme: PhD East Asian Studies

Dear Shiqin

PROJECT TITLE: Waste and Everyday Life in Contemporary China
APPLICATION: Reference Number 048851

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 25/07/2022 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 048851 (form submission date: 13/07/2022); (expected project end date: 01/10/2024).
- Participant information sheet 1109906 version 1 (07/07/2022).
- Participant information sheet 1109905 version 1 (07/07/2022).
- Participant consent form 1109908 version 1 (07/07/2022).
- Participant consent form 1109907 version 1 (07/07/2022).

The following amendments to this application have been approved:

- Amendment approved: 23/01/2023
  -

If during the course of the project you need to deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation please inform me since written approval will be required.

Your responsibilities in delivering this research project are set out at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely

Clea Carroll
Ethics Admin
School of East Asian Studies

Please note the following responsibilities of the researcher in delivering the research project:

- The project must abide by the University's Research Ethics Policy: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/research-services/ethics-integrity/policy
- The project must abide by the University's Good Research & Innovation Practices Policy: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.671066!/file/GRIPPolicy.pdf
- The researcher must inform their supervisor (in the case of a student) or Ethics Admin (in the case of a member of staff) of any significant changes to the project or the approved documentation.
- The researcher must comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data.
- The researcher is responsible for effectively managing the data collected both during and after the end of the project in line with best practice, and any relevant legislative, regulatory or contractual requirements.