



Belly of the World: Toxicity, Innocence, and Indigestibility in *Plastic China*

Emily Ng

In January 2018, on the eve of the Trump administration's trade war against China, the Xi administration began halting the import of 24 categories of solid waste from foreign countries, including most plastics, citing environmental and health concerns. Within the span of a year, plastic imports dropped by over 90 percent in the People's Republic of China (PRC), causing a seismic shift in the international waste markets (Staub 2019). Prior to this waste import ban—officially known as Operation National Sword—the PRC processed around half of the world's discarded plastic and was the top destination for plastic waste from the US, the European Union, Japan, South Korea, and elsewhere (Wen et al. 2021). Following the ban, countries across the globe rushed to find new destinations for their refuse, with some municipalities halting recycling programs altogether (Javorsky 2019).

Released a year before the Chinese state's initial discussions of National Sword—and rumored to have been an impetus for it—Wang Jiuliang's 2016 documentary film *Plastic China* follows two families working in a small-scale plastic processing factory in Shandong province in northeast

E. Ng (✉)
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA

© The Author(s) 2024
P. Gupta et al. (eds.), *Planetary Hinterlands*, Palgrave Studies in
Globalization, Culture and Society,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-24243-4_2

China. The film’s setting feels neither urban nor rural in a classic sense. After an opening shot of a toddler playing in a cave of plastic, the film moves to the industrial loading docks of Qingdao (Tsingtao) Harbor. The camera follows the slow, smooth movement of a cargo ship as it enters the port (Fig. 2.1a). Echoing the Germanic etymology and original definition of hinterland as that which is *behind* the (often colonial) port (the city and harbor of Qingdao were built as a concession to German forces in 1898, during the European “scramble for concessions” in China), viewers are invited to travel with the containers as they are lowered onto truck beds and move beyond the dock, through small market towns and villages (Fig. 2.1b–c). The containers soon shed their shells, revealing sacks of waste as they move against the backdrop of idyllic sun-lit wheat fields (Fig. 2.1d). The pairing of radiant green and gold fields with the industrial aesthetics of container trucks and global garbage sets the scene for a sense of matter out of place and, if we follow Bakhtin (1981), also out of time—the cyclical, repetitive temporality evoked by the rural idyll, in which human rhythms and natural rhythms move in harmony, is intruded upon by capitalist modes of abstraction and mechanized labor. At last, one of the trucks arrives at its destination: the small family-owned plastic waste processing factory where most of the film will take place.



Fig. 2.1 a–d Screenshots from *Plastic China*

Extending port-centered definitions of hinterland and agriculture-centered ones of rurality, recent scholarship approaches the hinterlands of today as spaces—both peri-urban and rural—intimately connected with global trade, housing not only classic forms of non-urban production but also logistical processes from data farms to garbage disposals to renewable energy generation (Neel 2018; Introduction to this volume). While both the countryside and hinterlands may be considered sites of material resource provision (agricultural and otherwise), their spectralization in urban-centered imaginaries—including the sense of their incompatibility with global capitalism—casts them as peripheral, justifying their devaluation and obscuring their inextricability with the city (Spivak 2000; Williams 1975).

While “hinterland” evokes remoteness, emptiness, and marginality in figurative Anglophone usages, in modern Chinese, hinterland has been translated as *fudi*, lit. “belly land,” connoting not only a storage space, but also themes of digestion, the vulnerability of the viscera, and an inner centrality.¹ A term related to *fudi* is *neidi*, lit. “inner land,” which carries similar connotations of remoteness and marginality to the English hinterland, but is associated with landlocked rural and provincial geographies rather than with port-adjacent hinterlands. In Chinese economic and geographic scholarship, hinterlands—not unlike in the technical Anglophone usage—are framed as crucial for the growth and sustenance of urban regions: “[The] hinterland supplies resources for the economic activities of central cities, so the range and the quality of hinterland are very important to a city’s development” (Pan et al. 2008, 635). Approaching *Plastic China* as a cinematic portrayal of hinterlands in multiple potential senses, this chapter considers how the film deploys an aesthetics of the toxic sublime and a temporality of stagnation by the measures of progressive time. When juxtaposed with themes of childhood innocence and potentiality, these produce an ecocritical momentum driven by a moralized sense of disgust, pointing to what is deemed an indigestible scene within a global capitalist metabolic system.²

¹ Thanks to Tong Wu for the reflection on vulnerability. Thanks to Shola Adenekan for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

² See Schneider and McMichael’s (2010) critical rethinking of Marx’s rendering of capitalism and/as metabolic rift.

EATING TIME: PLASTICS BETWEEN POST/SOCIALISM AND GLOBAL CAPITALISM

In her essay “Life and Death in the Anthropocene: A Short History of Plastic,” Heather Davis (2015) describes plastic use as “tempophagy”—time-eating—where the compressed bodies of very old plants and animals (in the crude oil from which plastic’s synthetic polymers are derived) are re-consumed through the very short consumerist lifespans of the single-use take-out container. Plastic, as she puts it, “can be considered the substrata of advanced capitalism” (Davis 349).³ Meanwhile, in *Synthetic Socialism*, Eli Rubin describes mainstream perceptions of plastic in 1950s–1970s East Germany, where it signaled a nearly inverted set of values to those it was assigned in capitalist imaginaries and usages. In the former German Democratic Republic, plastic was considered a “precious collective resource, to be cherished and not disposed of,” in stark contrast with the notions of inferiority and disposability assigned to plastic by West Germans and others outside of the Soviet sphere (Rubin 2008, 11). Bauhaus-inspired industrial designers in East Germany emphasized the functionalist, anti-capitalist qualities of their plastic creations. Between the fast, throwaway, distinction-making consumerism of capitalism and the slow, built-to-last, equality-focused consumption of socialism, plastic reveals itself to be polysemous, capable of hosting contrasting political-economic temporalities.

Unlike in East Germany, plastic was not a prominent material, physically or symbolically, in Maoist China. Food tended to be transferred in paper, beer was stored in returnable glass bottles, and parcels were often sent in cotton bags; the boom of plastic arrived only after the death of Mao and the “opening” of the Chinese economy to global markets in the late 1970s. The explosion of demand for plastic, owing to China’s new role as factory of the world (due to the comparatively low costs of labor), soon outpaced the country’s capacity to produce it, and the Chinese state came up with a solution: to import waste plastic from wealthier countries that were “both more addicted to plastic use and increasingly concerned about the state of their environment” (Hilton 2020, 131). The same

³A far cry from the pleasurable amazement associated with plastic’s capacities for “infinite transformation” described by Barthes in the 1950s (1972, 97), plastic has come to signal a fatal and indeed stubbornly unchangeable substance, part and parcel of the Anthropocene and its movement toward planetary doom (Carrington 2016).

shipping containers that carried exports to the world would now return, filled with the remains of what had been consumed. With the massive rise of waste import, small, informal enterprises for hand-sorting imported plastic waste multiplied, often on the outskirts of cities and in rural areas. By the 1990s, “China had gone from a country that produced and consumed almost no plastic to be the world’s biggest producer,” and plastic grew to be ever-present, not only for the export markets, but also for new items of domestic consumption—and waste—within China itself (Hilton 2020, 130–131; Wen et al. 2021).

Prior to the recent hypervisibility of Chinese plastic waste import and processing, what sustained the mass import of global plastic waste in China, aside from the economic dimensions of low-paid labor and low cost of shipping (thus allowing the avoidance of expensive processing at home), was precisely the rendering-invisible of plastic waste to global consumers and regulators. Media coverage of *Plastic China* and the dramatic “cutting” of foreign waste imports by Operation National Sword have brought this previously low-profile state of affairs into the global limelight, making plastic waste a visual signifier of a political battleground between capitalist and post/socialist worlds. The chronotopic projection of an ever-advancing, ever-accelerating, smooth-flowing, border-free capitalism meets a dramatic “blockage” to the global digestive system of plastic consumption. Approaching waste as matter out of perceived “use-time,” with recycling being a case of potential transformation from waste-time back into use-time (Viney 2014), the post/socialist hinterland of the plastic reprocessing factory might be considered a purgatorial zone previously out of sight for many global consumers, where waste acquires another life. The now-visible specter of the family-run processing plant, filled with young children, comes to haunt transnational audiences through their exposure to previously unseen bowels of plastic consumption and murky underworlds where a portion of plastic was quietly reincarnated. Not unlike ritual separations of purity and pollution in other places and times (Douglas 1966), plastic seems to undergo a transnational ritual of purification in a zone now demarcated and distanced as wasteland and waste-time, in spite of the central role of such spaces in plastic’s return to global consumer markets in its purified version: “made from recycled plastic.”⁴ Such waste and waste-times are not exclusive to capitalist or post/socialist

⁴Thanks to Naor Ben-Yehoyada for the conversation on ritual purification and to the Kinship and Semiotics group at Columbia for the discussion of an early version of the chapter.

worlds but pose the question of a reluctantly shared body, as stubbornly indigestible materials move through the intimate organs of the global digestive system, oscillating between “use” and “waste.” Here, I return to *Plastic China* to explore aesthetic themes of toxicity and indigestibility, as well as the question of finitude and potentiality posed by the film’s juxtaposition of plastic and humans—especially children.

THE ENDS OF LIFE: TOXICITY AND INERTIA

After establishing the initial contrast between industrial containers and idyllic agricultural landscapes, the film deploys a particular aesthetics of toxicity, juxtaposing the inorganic inertia of plastic with the potentiality of childhood. Such imagery evokes—as online commentaries attest to—visceral affects of disgust and indignation, in an era when climate concerns and sustainable food movements have grown increasingly prominent globally. Initial shots of the family-run processing plant show Kun, the factory owner, pushing a massive roll of plastic waste, alongside an already-present mountain of plastic rising above his height (Fig. 2.2a). The child protagonist, Yi Jie—eldest daughter in the family employed by Kun—and the other children of the two families are shown working and playing near, on, or in these heaps of plastic (Fig. 2.2b–d).



Fig. 2.2 a–d Screenshots from *Plastic China*

In her work on geontopower, Elizabeth Povinelli (2016) describes the distinction between life and nonlife—in addition to the more commonly critiqued distinction between human and nonhuman—as foundational to Western philosophies of being, extending into late liberal forms of governance. In these renderings, that which separates animate beings filled with potentiality from inanimate objects lacking such potentiality is the temporal limit of finitude: that which cannot die holds no potential. Inertia is contrasted with cycles of birth and death, marked by growth, change, and decay in the interim. The human child, in this sense, epitomizes such imaginaries of potentiality. To repeatedly juxtapose children with plastic—an ultimate symbol of “lifeless” substance infamous for its incapacity to biodegrade—thus tugs at the heart of the geontological split. By existing outside of life and death, plastic “represents the fundamental logic of finitude, carrying the horrifying implications of the inability to decompose, to enter back into systems of decay and regrowth” (Davis 2015, 353).

This uncanny pairing of life and inertia intensifies its affective force through images of ingestion and, more specifically, of what might be called a toxic consubstantiality. In a scene that garnered much online commentary, the young Yi Jie dips her comb in the water where some of the white plastic fragments are being washed and runs it through her hair—“...brushing her hair with toxic water!” as one online commentator exclaims. The disgust mobilized by the combination of wetness and plastic’s evocation of toxicity is heightened with images of gray sludge (Fig. 2.3a) produced amid the nonbiological “digestive” process of plastics, in transition from their discarded forms as waste into recycled pellets for further use. Paired with such colors and textures, olfactory signals enter the scene—close-ups of burning plastic, plumes of thick gray and black smoke, the wrinkled nose of Yi Jie (Fig. 2.3b) and commentary from adult employees on the “disgusting” smells of the garbage. The disturbing proximity between the processing of indigestible plastics and the life-sustaining processes of human digestion culminates in shots of the families eating food cooked with the flames of burning plastic, which includes dead fish scooped from the nearby plastic-filled river (Fig. 2.3c–d).

INNOCENCE AND THE TOXIC SUBLIME

At the same time, and not external to this theme of toxicity and the threat to life, a sense of aesthetic awe is evoked by the texture and selective coloration of plastic waste—heaps awash in white (Fig. 2.2a–c)—the



Fig. 2.3 a–d Screenshots from *Plastic China*

gleaming, semi-translucent visuality and crunch of which seem to counterpose itself to the green and brown organicity associated with nature and with rurality. Indeed, in shots that focus on the children living at the family factory, the composition is such that the whiteness of the plastic begins overwhelming the children in visual proportions, nearing the top edge of the frame or exceeding the frame altogether—a sea of plastic with seemingly no end (Figs. 2.2b–d and 2.4a–b). This sense of grandeur, paired with concerns over environmental pollution, is described by Jennifer Peeples (2011) in terms of the “toxic sublime” in her analysis of post-1970s ecological photography in the US, especially that of Edward Burtynsky. Drawing on Kant’s and Edmund Burke’s characterizations of the sublime as that which is vast, magnificent, infinite, and unfathomable and *moves* the mind toward a form of negative contemplation, Peeples points to the simultaneous sense of revulsion and awe captured by the toxic sublime, whose contemplation can offer impetus for change.

This sense of the toxic sublime, with caveats I will turn to in a moment, is also present in *Plastic China*, particularly through the visual immersion of the viewer in its mountains and seas of white trash: white—a paradoxical color of modern cleanliness when paired with waste, a Western color of the angelic and of childhood innocence, and in China, a color of death, worn historically and today at funerary ceremonies. The symbolic



Fig. 2.4 a–b Screenshots from *Plastic China*

multiplicity of white as color and the common sensibility toward plastic as inorganic and never-decomposing together conjure a time out of time, an inertness that points at once to human finitude and a plastic eternity—all while evoking both innocence and mourning. Such paradoxes of aesthetic attraction and aversion are precisely what Peebles describes in the potential effect of the toxic sublime, which aims to produce a moment of hesitation and contemplation, specifically of one’s own complicity with the state of affairs.⁵

While Peebles emphasizes works such as Burtynsky’s, which she argues deliberately exclude humans from their depictions of toxic landscapes, thus leaving the viewer in ethical suspension by interrupting their impulse to seek out subjects for pity and blame, the sublime aesthetics of *Plastic China* are paired with character-driven shots and plotlines that return the viewers to a search for usual suspects. By centering on Yi Jie as the child protagonist caught between two adult masculine figures, the film foregrounds a modern dissonance between a backward rural paternalism and an implicit forward-moving good of modern schooling and access to capitalist consumption. The former is embodied by Peng, Yi Jie’s father, who

⁵ See also the collection of Somatosphere essays on “Toxicity, Waste, Detritus” (Gupta and Hecht 2017).

is shown to spend his money on alcohol (a “bad” use of time and capital) and who refuses to let Yi Jie go to school (Fig. 2.4c), in contrast to the hardworking, pro-education factory owner Kun (Fig. 2.4d), who labors toward his dream of owning a brand-new car, so that he may get rid of what his mother calls his “crappy” old van. While the irony of the “good” of furthering cycles of consumption and waste is likely not lost on the filmmaker or viewers, the film’s reliance on character tropes of forwardness and backwardness plotted against the rubric of modern progressive time is hard to ignore. Moreover, this developmentalist temporality is spatialized onto a humanist dissonance between waste(land) and (childhood) purity.

WASTE: BETWEEN CONSUBSTANTIATION AND LOCALIZATION

In an ambitious effort to identify four elementary modes of human relationality—communal sharing, authority ranking, equality matching, and market pricing—anthropologist Alan Fiske (2004) describes *consubstantial assimilation* as formative of what he calls communal sharing relations. The sharing of food and other comestible substances—including those some deem toxic such as tobacco and drugs—Fiske suggests, draws an equivalence between material bodies and provides the foundation for a certain style of human relationality centered on likeness; for him, kinship is the prototype of such a relation. In *Plastic China*, plays and alternations of sympathy and disgust—the relatability of the laughing children and the deplorability of their illiberal parents; the ethics of an any-work-necessary stance amid poverty; and a how-could-they sensibility toward a plastic-infused life—mirror a tension between a sharing of toxic consumption as condition for global kinship and an implicit denial of consubstantiation through the localization of toxicity to a plastic *China*.

The spatialization of the issue speaks, of course, to the geography of waste export and the film’s aim to expose a previously obscured issue: certain modes of life, perceived as tainted, built out of the debris of perceived purity on the other side of consumption—imagination of recycling as a “clean,” ethical act of regeneration. Early in the film, close-ups of discarded materials from far-flung sources signal the transnational origins of the waste: a Science Plan dog food bag from US-based Hill’s pet foods, wrapping materials from Italy’s Magro paper products, a crushed margarine lid from UK-based Flora ProActiv. The day-to-day denial of one’s own toxicity is capacitated by the smooth shipping of (here Western) waste abroad. Yet this reminder of shared digestion within the global capitalist

system—from “mouth” to “belly”—quickly recedes, and much of the film homes in on the localized peculiarities of toxicity, on the one hand, and Chinese fantasies of the foreign through its material goods, on the other.⁶ Yi Jie is shown carefully cutting out and arranging images of pink shoes and clothes from foreign magazines, and the children are shown playing with discarded foreign toys. While many qualities can be evoked by these scenes (creativity, resourcefulness, or the possibility of circular economies, for instance), Anglophone online commentary tends to be centered on pity.⁷ Between the affective affordances of the film and this dominant angle of reception, the hinterland of the recycling factory is figured as a space of foregone childhood, in which the West is positioned as both the origin of a stunted life and the means of exiting it. The foreign-waste-land is posited as a land of coercion and stagnation (reinforced by the local patriarch), with Western-style education and consumption positioned as the apparent escape.

Here, it is useful to contrast the 82-minute official cut of *Plastic China* that circulated globally—first through film festivals (Sundance, Full Frame, IDFA, and more) and then through major online streaming services (Amazon Prime, Apple TV, Google Play, YouTube, and others)—and the 26-minute cut that gained widespread attention in China prior to the official cut. In the shorter cut of the film—what Wang Jiuliang refers to as the “media version”—some themes and aesthetics distinct from the official cut are put into play. Thematically, the ethical implications of *foreign* waste and *local* toxicity stay front and center in the shorter cut, through the filming locations, interviewees, and conversation content. Rather than at Qingdao Harbor, for instance, the film begins at a recycling center in Berkeley, California, and shows US employees sorting through piles of plastic waste, with a visibility not far from their Chinese counterparts to come, albeit using a conveyor belt and wearing gloves (Fig. 2.5a). While not so pointed in its staging of proportional overwhelm and disgust, there is a similar sense of dirt, manual labor, and a certain haphazardness at the heart of recycling, far from, say, an aesthetics of purity and cleanliness (Fig. 2.5b). Many of the workers shown appear to be BIPOC, including the recycling director interviewed; they speak of their lack of full

⁶Thanks to Nomonde Gwebu for the reminder on the “mouth.”

⁷See Jennifer Wenzel (2017) on waste as “Alpha and Omega: the beckoning origin of development and its troublesome end product.”



Fig. 2.5 a–d Screenshots from *Plastic China* (media version); top two images set in the US (California) and bottom two images set in China (Shandong)

knowledge about what will happen with the materials they sort after they are shipped off to China.

Aside from the US-based recycling staff, the China-based characters are also more wide-ranging. Rather than centering on the two families and the question of Yi Jie’s education, an array of villagers—plastic waste processing staff from various facilities as well as other residents who share the local landscape—are shown debating the ethics and legality of waste import and unofficial processing factories, including the conundrum of harm to health and environmental versus economic necessity. The local effects of plastic waste processing are highlighted through interviews with villagers: the polluting of local groundwater leading to the need to purchase bottled spring water, the difficulty of harvesting wheat covered in plastic debris, a sense of increasing rates of cancer even among the young, and more.

Notably missing in this shorter cut are the centralization of the character and storyline of Yi Jie and the intensified aesthetics of innocence of the official version. While Yi Jie, Peng, Yi Jie’s mother, and Kun and his children all appear in the shorter cut, the cast of characters is more widely scattered, centering on questions of community, conundrum, and a critique of state and economic power rather than on the character development of the child and the two patriarchs. The aesthetics of this cut also

differ from those of the globally circulated version. Although still filled with ruinous landscapes of plastic waste, the color palettes of the plastic vary widely across shots—a mishmash of blues, yellows, pinks, browns, blacks, and whites (Fig. 2.5c–d). The implication of the party-state is also emphasized more: multiple images featuring Chinese Communist Party slogans and flags pepper the scenes (these are also present in official cut, but they only appear once and, unlike in the short version, are left without subtitling, thus likely to be missed by Anglophone viewers).

Compared to the cut first shared with audiences in the PRC, the version circulated on the global stage appeals distinctly to the abhorrence of a spoiled childhood, with the central promotional image for the film being one of Yi Jie holding her infant sister, swallowed by a sea of white (Fig. 2.6).

Unlike this appeal to a humanitarian aesthetics, the media cut focused on the deplorable flow and transformation of foreign waste into local toxicity—and, unlike in the official cut, both Japanese and Western origins of waste (through the words visible on discarded packaging) are highlighted. Moreover, the media cut implicitly mobilizes viewers to attribute responsibility to the (Chinese) state, with its repeated references to Chinese Communist Party emblems and slogans. This discrepancy is not lost on the filmmaker and likely gestures toward a multiplicity of strategies for evoking responses from distinct viewerships. In an interview with media scholar Jin Liu, for instance, Wang Jiuliang responds to a question on audience reaction:

Audiences abroad and at home are angry. For the foreign audience, they're angry and want to know why their trash ended up going to China. They also feel guilty over the alternative lifestyle of these two families and start to reflect upon their own consumption styles. For the Chinese audience [after watching the 26-minute media version], they were angry about the terrible impact of foreign waste on the environment and people in China. (Wang 2020, bracketed comment in original)

While both centered on the production of righteous anger and disgust as moral-political affects (see Ngai 2005), the two cuts offer distinct stagings of the conundrum: one that evokes the guilt in the face of the innocent other (paired with a disgust toward toxicity and illiberal backwardness) and one that evokes indignation in face of the injustice of the dominant foreign other (and also disgust, but centered on the foreign source of internal toxicity). The former, while not unlikely to be effective in its



Fig. 2.6 *Plastic China* DVD cover

production of affects, simultaneously reproduces an image of China as a site of unfreedom and authoritarian paternalism—reminiscent of Cold War imagery of lost childhood on the other side of the iron curtain,

deployed by both sides (Peacock 2014). This is not an accusation of Wang with relation to directorial intentions or of the capacity of the film to propel social action. Rather, it is to attend to the aesthetics of ecocritical affect production that accompanies cultural imaginaries of hinterlands, wherein China is staged through a curious mix of pity and disgust (both political and bodily), recapitulating historical Western depictions of China as lacking in both hygiene and liberty, and, more broadly, humanitarian imagery as producing an object of concern through which an imagined “international community” constitutes itself (Heinrich 2008; Ko 2005; Malkki 1996). Indeed, this mix of pity and disgust is evoked in recent articulations of hinterlands as a conceptual geography—Phil Neel’s *Hinterland* (2018) calls for a global unity beyond politics of blood and nation while opening with a vignette that reproduces familiar Sinophobic tropes: the stench of Chinese bodies to a Western nose sitting on an overpopulated train.

CLOSING

As this volume makes apparent, hinterlands can open up new conceptual spaces for critical inquiry when distinctions such as rural and urban face what Lauren Berlant calls a “waning of genre” (2011, 6)—when conventions of relating to fantasy grow out of sync with the historical present. In the case of *Plastic China*, the oft-forgotten global dimension of rural spaces is usefully foregrounded with the maritime arrival of transnational waste. Distinct symbolic-affective constellations are evoked across different cuts of the film to bring attention to uneven distributions of waste and the troubled conditions of life they afford and to mobilize ethical-political responses from distinct viewers. While this might prove effective, such aesthetic strategies also risk reproducing developmentalist-humanitarian chronotopes, geontological divides, and Sinophobic tropes.

The official cut of the film, explored in this chapter, risks slotting certain forms of life back into a split between deplorable, life-strangling Chinese particularities and an enlightened, life-giving cycle of modern education and material wealth. These divides locate futurity and potentiality outside the spatial imaginary of the hinterlands and back into that of global middle-class modes of life—ones which rely on the consumerism-centered visions of the good life (new toys, new cars) that intensified plastic production and waste in the first place. To cite two Anglophone online comments, which echo the sentiments of many others: “My heart aches

for the poor children... They have aspirations, hopes and dreams. I wish some day they'll get the opportunity to escape this dreaded place"; "It'll be hard not to look away... The poverty level... is something to make you cry and count your blessings at the same time."⁸

In the case of plastic waste, themes of use and waste, inertia, and finitude also enter the scene. Such waste-times, marked by moments of flow and blockage between purported centers and peripheries, gesture toward acts of shared tempophagy (time-eating) and tempopepsia (time-digestion), wherein multiple “mouths” and “guts”—the post/socialist and late/capitalist—together consume and attempt to digest the indigestible.

Acknowledgment This chapter emerged from the project “Imagining the Rural in a Globalizing World” (RURALIMAGINATIONS, 2018–2023), which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No. 772436).

REFERENCES

- Bakhtin, M. M. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist and Translated by Caryl Emerson. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Barthes, Roland. 1972. *Mythologies*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Carrington, Damian. 2016. The Anthropocene Epoch: Scientists Declare Dawn of Human-Influenced Age. *The Guardian*, August 29.
- Davis, Heather. 2015. Life & Death in the Anthropocene: A Short History of Plastic. In *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, ed. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, 347–358. London: Open Humanities Press.
- Douglas, Mary. 1966. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Fiske, Alan Page. 2004. Four Modes of Constituting Relationships: Consubstantial Assimilation; Space, Magnitude, Time, and Force; Concrete Procedures;

⁸ Comments from “Plastic China,” *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovvujut-p6g>, Accessed 24 July 2022. A full comparison with Chinese online commentaries is beyond the scope of this chapter, but one response to the same YouTube video—written in Chinese and markedly different in its focal point—is telling: “拍的挺好的，推动了社会的进步。。现在洋垃圾正式全面禁止了。” (“[The film] is shot quite well, promoting society’s progress... now foreign garbage is formally fully banned”).

- Abstract Symbolism. In *Relational Models Theory*, ed. Nick Haslam. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Gupta, Pamila, and Gabrielle Hecht. 2017. Toxicity, Waste, Detritus: An Introduction. *Somatosphere* (blog), October 10.
- Heinrich, Larissa N. 2008. *The Afterlife of Images: Translating the Pathological Body Between China and the West*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hilton, Isabel. 2020. Plastic in China: A Short History of a Crisis. In *Mare Plasticum – The Plastic Sea*, ed. Marilena Streit-Bianchi, Margarita Cimadevila, and Wolfgang Trettnak, 129–139. New York: Springer.
- Javorsky, Nicole. 2019. How China’s Policy Shift Is Changing U.S. Recycling. *Bloomberg CityLab*, April 1.
- Ko, Dorothy. 2005. *Cinderella’s Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Malkki, Liisa H. 1996. Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization. *Cultural Anthropology* 11 (3): 377–404.
- Neel, Phil A. 2018. *Hinterland: America’s New Landscape of Class and Conflict*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Ngai, Sienna. 2005. *Ugly Feelings*. Harvard University Press.
- Pan Jinghu, Shi Peiji, and Dong Xiaofeng. 2008. Measurements for Urban Hinterland Area of Cities at Prefecture Level Or Above in China. *Acta Geographica Sinica* 63 (6): 635–645. (in Chinese) [潘竟虎, 石培基, 董晓峰. 2008. 中国地级以上城市腹地的测度分析. *地理学报* 63(6): 635–645.]
- Peacock, Margaret. 2014. *Innocent Weapons: The Soviet and American Politics of Childhood in the Cold War*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Peebles, Jennifer. 2011. Toxic Sublime: Imaging Contaminated Landscapes. *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture* 5 (4): 373–392.
- Povinelli, Elizabeth A. 2016. *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*. Illustrated edition. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Rubin, Eli. 2008. *Synthetic Socialism: Plastics and Dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Schneider, Mindi, and Philip McMichael. 2010. Deepening, and Repairing, the Metabolic Rift. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 37 (3): 461–484.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 2000. From Haverstock Hill Flat to US Classroom, What’s Left of Theory. In *What’s Left of Theory: New Work on the Politics of Literary Theory*, ed. Judith Butler, John Guillory, and Kendall Thomas, 1–39. New York: Routledge.
- Staub, Colin. 2019. China: Plastic Imports Down 99 Percent, Paper Down a Third – Resource Recycling. *Resource Recycling News*, January 29.
- Viney, William. 2014. *Waste: A Philosophy of Things*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

- Wang, Jiuliang. 2016. *Plastic China* [塑料王国]. CNEX Foundation.
- . 2020. *A Cinematic Presentation of Trash: An Interview with Wang Jiuliang Interview by Jin Liu*. MCLC Resource Center Publication.
- Wen, Zongguo, Yiling Xie, Muhan Chen, and Christian Doh Dinga. 2021. China's Plastic Import Ban Increases Prospects of Environmental Impact Mitigation of Plastic Waste Trade Flow Worldwide. *Nature Communications* 12 (1): 1–9.
- Wenzel, Jennifer. 2017. Waste. *Somatosphere* (blog), October 23.
- Williams, Raymond. 1975. *The Country and the City*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

