Spring 2021

Waste Politics in Asia and Global Repercussions

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Environmental activists hold a banner calling for the Canadian Government to take back fifty containers of mixed waste illegally shipped into the Philippines.
Source: *The Gaia* website at https://tinyurl.com/nmh4kz4z. Photo by Gigie Cruz/BAN Toxics/GAIA.

Your Garbage Is on the Way Back

"Your garbage is on the way. Prepare a grand reception. Eat it if you want to." In 2019, this was Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's message to the Canadian government. He had finally convinced them to pay for the return of almost seventy shipping containers of imported garbage that had been sitting in a Philippine port since arriving from Canada in 2013–2014, and he was gloating about the small victory. The Canadian government had been pointing out that it was originally a private commercial transaction that mislabeled Canadian household waste as plastic for recycling, but that had not stopped the national populist Duterte from threatening to sail with the waste to dump it in Canadian waters, and even threatening to declare war.[1]

How should we critically interpret recent controversies over waste imports in Asian countries? This article provides a framework for this task. It then goes further to explore the crucial role of Asia in challenging a tendency to blame pollution on consumers, and to a lesser extent on governments. This trend instead implores us to think more about the corporations that *produce* disposable products in the first place.

Duterte's provocative message made it on to comedian Trevor Noah's ongoing segment "If You Don't Know, Now You Know" on the *Daily Show*. The segment, titled "Asian Nations Reject Western Trash," has over 5.1 million views on YouTube at the time of writing, more than any other editions of Noah's segment.[2] While it is relatively rare for popular media to cover garbage, a substance as mundane as it is ubiquitous, stories about the West dumping waste in Asia are not new. They go back at least to 2001, when the Basel Action Network's (BAN) report "Exporting Harm: The High-Tech Trashing of Asia" exposed the environmental and health effects in Asia of e-waste trading that largely originates in Western countries.[3] The broader significance of the viral *Daily Show* segment is that it helped an important message about waste and recycling from recent Asian waste politics pierce

Screen capture of "If You Don't Know, Now You Know" segment featuring Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte from *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* at https://tinyurl.com/928z7pwv.

popular consciousness. In the simplest terms, the message is that industrial recycling is a process that displaces garbage and pollution elsewhere. This perspective is captured by another news clip shown in Noah's segment that leads by stating, "China stopped taking the dirty *recycling* that it called 'foreign *garbage*'" (emphasis added).

Here is a slightly longer explanation: The imbroglio between the Philippines and Canada appears to be based on a mix-up of two distinct types of materials—garbage and recycling. But this distinction is often far murkier than is assumed by the recycling public of wealthier countries. Much of the so-called "recycling" that gets thrown in bins, especially single-stream recycling bins, is composed of materials tainted with excessive food and oil residues, materials that cannot be technically recycled despite the presence of recycling logos, or nonrecyclable objects that end up in recycling streams due to inattentive disposal or "wishcycling" (putting waste in a recycling bin in hopes that it will be recycled while knowing that it probably will not). Together, these materials pollute postconsumer

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recycling streams and can negate the scrap value of materials that are only marginally valuable to begin with. In fact, considering the high percentage of technically recyclable materials that end up in municipal waste, along with the high percentage of nonrecyclable materials that end up in recycling, separate streams of garbage and recycling can be quite similar in their material composition.

Plastic China

Promotional poster for *Plastic China*. Source: Cnex at https://tinyurl.com/dburczk4.

For about two decades, China was the center of gravity of global waste imports. Prior to the Chinese government's new enforcement of bans in 2018, 70 percent of postconsumer plastics from the US and 95 percent from the European Union were sold to Chinese brokers.[4] When China first announced it was banning the importation of "foreign garbage," the materials in question were not household garbage. Rather, they were mostly types of plastic "recyclables" of marginal value that had been processed in unregulated workshops for decades.

Plastic China, a riveting documentary film and invaluable educational resource, exposes how devastating the unregulated processing of plastic has been on local environments and the people who live there. The film provides an intimate look at one small workshop for processing waste plastic that is inland from a northern Chinese shipping port. Behind a human drama based on poverty and dreams for a better life, it captures how water sources are ruined from the toxic liquid left over from the process and highlights the massive quantities of plastic that are unusable and must get dumped somewhere or burned away, sending carcinogenic dioxins into the air. The main laborer at the workshop is Peng, a migrant from a poor region in southwestern Sichuan Province. The film follows Peng as he is exposed daily to safety and environmental risks, has little choice but to let his young children spend their days playing among the dangerous materials, and is minimally compensated by the workshop owner.

The squalid setting and polluting processes seen in the film are not abnormalities. They are precisely the preconditions for recycling much of the world's postconsumer plastic. Adding pollution controls along with adequate protection and compensation for workers are costs that would make processing low-value materials economically unviable. This is why, for decades now, so many recyclables have flowed from wealthier countries

Global Anti Incineration Alliance Philippines Executive Director Froilan Grate shows a discarded pack of a Nestle product as he stands on a trash-filled shoreline along Manila Bay in Navotas City, Philippines. Source: Greenpeace at https://tinyurl.com/43jx27fr. © Greenpeace.

with high labor costs and strict environmental laws to poorer countries. In general, this means a lot of plastics flowing into Asia, although Asia is a very broad geopolitical category and there are exceptions and important nuances. For example, prior to 2018, Japan exported about 1.5 million tons of waste plastic per year, the majority of which went to China.[5] There are also major waste import markets in Africa, Eastern Europe, and elsewhere outside of Asia. After China's bans, waste exporters scrambled to find new buyers, and there have been reports of massive increases of imports in other markets, including in the Philippines, Việt Nam, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and India. Most of these nations' governments are emulating China's bans by imposing new, strict restrictions of their own.

Seeing industrializing countries in Asia as part of a shifting and interconnected global structure is crucial for how we understand where postconsumer pollution appears and why. For example, in 2016, The Ocean Conservancy published a misleading report stating that 60 percent of the plastic pollution circulating in the world's ocean—killing marine life and working its way up food chains—comes from just five countries that are all in Asia: China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Việt Nam. [6] Later, a German study suggested that up to 95 percent of the oceans' plastic pollution comes from just ten rivers, eight in Asia and two in Africa. These statistics are regularly repeated in media reports and have been used by politicians in the US and elsewhere to argue against environmental regulations that would target plastic pollution. They complain that if Asia is far more responsible for the problem, why are *we* the ones restricting economic growth!?

However, much of the plastic pollution that flows into oceans from these regions is tied to multinational corporations based in the West such as Nestlé (Switzerland), Coca-Cola (US), and Unilever (England). Each serves as a parent company for a wide range of brands, especially food and beverage companies that rely on single-use containers and disposable packaging.[7] In recent decades, these multinational corporations have increasingly targeted the markets of less wealthy non-Western countries for growth. The global flow of postconsumer plastic waste to the recycling markets of these same countries also must not be overlooked. The Asian nations singled out as the main perpetrators of ocean pollution are clearly also victims of transnational economic arrangements that they do not fully control. In recent years, both government and nongovernment actors in these countries are pushing back.

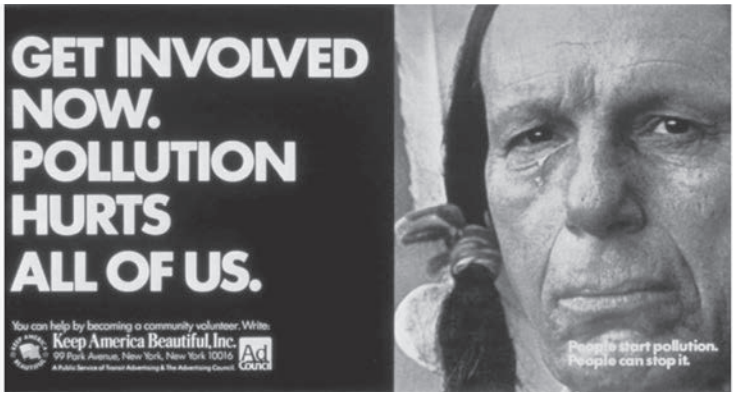
Using Brand Names against the Brands

"They feel there is value in brand … We wanted to use it against them." These are the words of community activist Froilan Grate, featured in the *NPR* news story "A New Weapon in the War against Plastic Waste."[8] After years of efforts to confront the problems of plastic waste clogging Philippine waterways and leaking toxicity into the environment, Grate and others made an innovative change to communal beach cleanups. Typically, these activities involve volunteers picking up litter and sending it to be disposed of in dumps and landfills, after which it may or may not migrate back to the environment and ocean. To push these activities further, they added a painstaking step of identifying the brand names and companies responsible for producing each piece of litter collected. In other words, all pieces of litter with an identifiable brand were tallied so that participants could determine who the real polluters were. This was a way to counter the Western narrative that Asian countries were primarily responsible for the ocean plastic pollution, which had angered many in the Philippines. Who is actually responsible for the problem? According to Grate, ultimate responsibility lies with the companies that produce and profit

from single-use and disposable plastic packaging, as well as the broader political–economic systems that allow this model to persist.

As hundreds of individual brand names were tallied and tied to parent companies, and the data publicized, big brand names started to receive unwanted attention. The focus of media discourse was shifting. Instead of blaming the consumers of goods that are delivered in disposable plastic in a way that identifies them with the nation-state they live in, blame was pointed at multinational corporations and the localized and global environmental impacts of the goods that they produce.

This shift of focus from consumption to production is of historical significance. Companies that utilize disposable packaging, especially beverage companies, have made concerted efforts since the 1960s to define litter narrowly as a problem of consumer behavior. The most infamous advertising campaign in the US, funded by the Keep America Beautiful organization, showed a "crying Indian" (played by an Italian–American actor) moved to tears from the sight of litter being thrown out of a car window. Its message was individualized: "People start pollution. People can stop it." These campaigns were remarkably effective, and not only for reducing litter. They shaped the mainstream environmental movement's messaging around waste, suggesting that a primary focus of environmental campaigns should be to simply convince individuals to place plastic waste in recycling bins.[9] Convenient for the corporations that helped fund the organization, this message minimized consideration of producer responsibility, as well as the often-polluting, inefficient, and unjust process of recycling. As these corporations have expanded their transnational reach over the decades, they have benefited from the concurrent globalization of a version of



A Keep America Beautiful advertisement by the Ad Council, which was launched in 1971. Source: *The Chicago Tribune* at https://tinyurl.com/9w7dfkcr. Original credit: Ad Council (HANDOUT).

environmentalism that emphasizes above all the individual responsibility of people as consumers—a narrative they helped create.[10]

There have long been counternarratives seeking to refocus the discussion on producer responsibility. Grate's innovation of counting brand names has created a renewed counternarrative that is grounded in the act of gathering litter and counting brands, an activity accessible to almost everyone. It has grown into a global movement. The coalition Break Free from Plastic (BFFP) formed in 2016 and now has over 11,000 organizations and individual members from around the world. Demanding massive reductions in the production of single-use plastics, the coalition has now organized three global brand audits. The most recent audit from 2020 identified Coca-Cola as the top polluter for the third year in a row, followed by PepsiCo, Nestlé, Unilever, Mondelez International, Mars Inc., Procter & Gamble, Philip Morris International, and Colgate–Palmolive. The data comes from fifty-five countries, 575 brand audits, 14,734 volunteers, and 346,494 pieces of plastic waste (63 percent of which had an identifiable brand).

Plastic Monsters

The Philippines continues to be an especially vibrant site for innovations in environmental activism. In 2019, environmental activists affiliated

Greenpeace's important question for Coca-Cola after a Greenpeace diver finds a Coca-Cola bottle adrift in the Great Pacific garbage patch . Source: Greenpeace at https://tinyurl.com/3s9nz7r3. © Greenpeace.

with BFFP confronted Nestlé, the company consistently found to be the top polluter in the Philippines based on local brand audits. The day before the company's annual general meeting, over 100 activists marched to their headquarters with a serpent-like monster that had been crafted out of single-use plastic waste left over from the company's products. A Greenpeace press release about this and other plastic monsters built around the world posed the question, "So where did the plastic monsters originate?" It answered:

> *Nestlé. Nestlé and other multinational corporations produce massive amounts of single-use plastic packaging . . . Last year, Nestlé used 1.7 million [tons] of plastic packaging. And while their latest move is to try to argue the exact numbers, the simple fact remains that Nestlé produced more plastic last year than the year before.*[11]

In addition to delivering the plastic monster, the action involved delivering an "invoice from the Filipino people" that outlined the devastation caused by Nestlé's plastic packaging, including impacts on human health, the environment, wildlife, livelihoods, greenhouse gas emissions, and waste management expenses. One of the participating activists had an especially pointed message for the company:

> *It is totally unjust that Nestlé is passing the burden for managing what is essentially an unmanageable waste problem on our local governments and citizens. Why should taxpayers assume the pollution legacy of a multibillion-dollar company? Our government should start charging Nestlé and similar companies for their share of our waste management costs. Our taxes should be used to support educational, health, and other social services for Filipinos, and not to cover up the pollution footprint of multinational companies.*[12]

The general response from corporations, in addition to trying to undermine citizen science data, has been to promise new investments in recycling publicity and technologies, along with alternative materials for packaging. This is a continuation of the original strategy from the Keep America Beautiful campaigns in the sense that it seeks to divert attention away from the inherent destructiveness, wastefulness, and unsustainability of single-use packaging. Instead, the companies are attempting to direct attention back toward the unfulfillable promise of recycling bins—the special receptacles that largely function to relieve middle-class consumers of guilt. This time, the strategy is only partly working. Bans on all single-use plastic products are already rolling out in many cities and entire countries around the world, from Malibu to Kenya to Taiwan.[13] While the struggle is ongoing, the bans show how powerful Grate's innovation to count brands has been.

Activists march at Nestlé HQ in the Philippines. A serpent-like plastic monster is accompanied by environmental activists carrying placards as they troop to Nestle's Philippine headquarters in Makati City, demanding accountability for its role in abetting the country's plastic pollution crisis. Nestlé was named one of the worst plastic polluters after cleanups and brand audits of plastic waste around the world in 2018. Source: Greenpeace at https://tinyurl.com/y7vwyw74. © Greenpeace.

Asian Environments and Environmentalism

The Asian origins of this movement disrupt a stubborn assumption that environmentalism is a Western phenomenon that only later spread to the global south and that innovations in environmental activism also follow this direction of dispersal. It could even be claimed that environmentalism has a longer history in Asia than in the West (e.g., tree-hugging as a protest strategy was invented in eighteenth-century India).[14] As this article has shown, these innovations and dispersal patterns are neither predetermined nor formulaic.[15]

The brand audit innovation, together with this account of how international waste politics are playing out in some Asian contexts, paints a complex picture of how Asian environments are affected not just by national policies and economic development trajectories but also by contested global hierarchies, geopolitics, and flows of corporate power and pollution. Asian countries' anti-foreign waste movements are mixtures of environmental justice advocacy and nationalistic posturing. They cannot be simply labeled as progressive or conservative, although posing this question can generate lively debate. On the other hand, it is not debatable that these anti-foreign waste movements have been productive. The movements are having major impacts on how people understand and collectively act in the world, and are starting to affect actual distributions of pollution. Especially significant is how these movements have helped lift the cloak off the unjust globalized industry of recycling. Together with new research showing how the earth's oceans, human and other animal bodies, and even the atmosphere are all increasingly saturated with microplastics that harbor toxic chemicals, the movements have challenged us to see *all* plastic waste as potentially harmful, whether it first appears in recycling or in garbage streams, or as uncontained litter.

In response to this challenge, BAN and BFFP recently led a successful campaign to amend the international treaty that regulates transboundary movements of hazardous wastes and their disposal, called the Basel Convention. Previously focused largely on e-waste (discarded electrical or electronic devices), starting in 2021 the treaty also covers many plastics exported for recycling. In the words of BAN's director, "The fact that the US will no longer be able to use the rest of the world as a plastic waste dump is a very significant victory for the environment and global justice."[16]

But the struggle continues. Plastic is made from oil, gas, and coal. Thus, fossil fuel companies are major stakeholders in the single-use plastic paradigm, even though their brand names do not appear on labels of discarded plastic. As the fossil fuel industry faces falling profits and increasing pressure from the climate change movement's demands for an energy paradigm shift, major industry players are banking on a global expansion of markets for single-use plastic to help maintain growth.[17] This planned expansion helps explain why many of the world's largest chemical plastic manufacturers have come together to pledge more than $1 billion USD to deal with plastic waste in the environment (thus distracting attention away from their expanding production of goods that will quickly become waste). Their primary regional focus for new recycling and waste reduction initiatives? Southeast Asia. Citing the familiar misleading statistics, the industry coalition is investing in a desperate attempt to keep the blame focused on consumers and countries, particularly those in Asia.[18]

Ultimately, international waste politics and Asia itself must be engaged in their full complexity. No caricature of a uniform Asia that simply mimics the West nor of an Asia that is distinctly "other" will explain how local Asian environments are being reshaped through the political

struggles outlined in this article. Further, no caricatures of an Asia that is simply a perpetrator or helpless victim will explain the dynamic coalitions that have emerged in recent years to challenge the status quo of global distributions of postconsumer plastic pollution.

Discussion Questions

1. Think about all the ways that disposability has become embedded in our lives, and how this form of material design and usage are increasingly taking root in less wealthy countries in Asia and elsewhere. What does this property make possible, and how has it shaped what is expected of us? What kinds of societal changes would be needed to disembed single-use and disposability, beyond limiting production of goods designed accordingly?

2. The brand audit approach focuses attention on companies that produce consumer goods that leave behind pollution by way of packaging. Beyond the companies whose brand names appear on labels, what other types of public and private entities are involved in producing and distributing these goods, and how might they also be held accountable? Hint: Think about what things are made of, where these things come from, and how these things are transported.

3. One common critique of recycling is that it should be less of a priority than reducing and reusing. However, discussion of these "three Rs" is often primarily focused on consumer behaviors. How might activist efforts to reframe post-consumer waste as determined by production expand how we think about reducing and reusing, in addition to recycling?

[Optional: Have each student draw a blank inverted triangle similar to the three Rs triangle and take ten minutes to fill in strategies for combating plastic waste that expand beyond the three Rs and beyond individual consumer responsibility.] ■

NOTES

1. Ronn Bautista, "Philippines Sends Trash Back to Canada after Duterte Escalates Row," *Reuters*, May 30, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/jv4676tx.
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3. The report is available online at https://tinyurl.com/yfwxunda.
4. Cheryl Katz, "Piling Up: How China's Ban on Importing Waste Has Stalled Global Recycling," *YaleEnvironment360*, March 7, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/4ecejarf.
5. "Chinese Ban Leaves Plastic Waste with Nowhere to Go," *Nippon.com*, June 20, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/vrvv5ezw.
6. Patrick Winn, "5 Countries Dump More Plastic into the Oceans than the Rest of the World Combined," *The World*, January 13, 2016, https://tinyurl.com/23nvyepf.
7. For a fascinating look at the ownership structure and "pseudo-diversity" of the soft drink industry in the US, see Phil Howard, Chris Duvall, and Kirk Goldsberry, *The Illusion of Diversity: Visualizing Ownership in the Soft Drink Industry*, August 2010, https://tinyurl.com/h8s34yw3.
8. Christopher Joyce, "A New Weapon in the War Against Plastic Waste," *NPR*, January 15, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/3z3rt8y6.
9. Finis Dunaway, "The 'Crying Indian' Ad That Fooled the Environmental Movement," *Chicago Tribune*, November 21, 2017, https://tinyurl.com/2vuruh6v.
10. This point is based on the author's ethnographic research on waste politics in China, as well as a set of online interviews with brand audit practitioners from different parts of the world.
11. Kaitlin Grable, "The Best Plastic Monsters from Around the World," *Greenpeace*, April 29, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/4b3jdbuk.
12. Greenpeace Philippines, "Green Groups to Nestlé: 'Own up, Pay up, Clean up Your Act!'," *Greenpeace*, April 10, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/4kdf8m8n.
13. Imogen Calderwood, "Sixteen Times Countries and Cities Have Banned Single-Use Plastics," *Global Citizen*, April 25, 2018, https://tinyurl.com/3h9srapr.
14. Brian Farrell, "Where Did the Phrase Tree-Hugger Come From?" *Earth Island Journal*, January 12, 2012, https://tinyurl.com/kyv7schy.
15. Several anthropologists have demonstrated this point thoroughly. My framing is especially influenced by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) and Michael J. Hathaway, *Environmental Winds: Making the Global in Southwest China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013).
16. "Basel Convention Agrees to Control Plastic Waste Trade," *Basel Action Network*, May 10, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/wmv95an.
17. Hiroko Tabuchi, Michael Corkery, and Carlos Mureithi, "Big Oil is in Trouble. Its Plan: Flood Africa with Plastic," *The New York Times*, Aug 30, 2020, https://tinyurl.com/2j9nm6wa.
18. Marissa Luck, "Industry-Led Effort Commits $1B to Curb Plastic Pollution," *Houston Chronicle*, January 14, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/47cmb4r9.

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