



## Beijing Besieged by Waste

2011 • Running time 86 minutes • Directed by Wang Jiuliang • Distributed by dGenerate Films

While China's economic ascent commands global attention, less light has been shed upon the monumental problem of waste spawned by a burgeoning population, booming industry, and insatiable urban growth. Award-winning photographer and director Wang Jiuliang focuses his lens on the grim spectacle of waste, detritus, and rubble unceremoniously piled upon the land surrounding China's Olympic city, capital, and megalopolis, Beijing. The film depicts the decimation of once-essential rivers and farmlands in the background of gleaming high-speed trains, stadiums, and skyscrapers. Wang's film reveals a sinister cyclical pattern of construction, consumption, and garbage. But it also provides moving images of the daily lives of the scavengers who live in the wastelands of Beijing.

### TEACHER'S GUIDE



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Face to Face Media 2019



# Beijing Besieged by Waste



Ken Berthel,  
Assistant Professor of  
Chinese, Whittier College

*“An example of the  
power of cinematic  
reportage in China  
today.”*

—Asian Educational  
Media Service



Filmmaker Wang Jiuliang

## WHY I SELECTED THIS FILM

*Beijing Besieged by Waste* exposes the largely hidden and unknown dark side of the lights, glamour, and architectural brilliance of rapidly developing Beijing as it becomes an international city. Wang reveals the lack of strategy and foresight in dealing with the concomitant waste that now surrounds the city, poisons essential and scarce natural resources, and fosters a dystopian landscape where some rural people still try to eke out a living. The film effectively calls attention to an ecological and social crisis that grows more desperate every day.

This documentary on the growing ecological disaster resulting from this rampant dumping of waste in the greater Beijing metropolitan area will find relevance in a number of courses on topics as varied as environmental studies, sociology, anthropology, urban studies, and film, among others.

## SUGGESTED SUBJECT AREAS

Anthropology

History

Environmental Science

Media Studies

Ethnography

Political Science

Geography

Urban Studies

## THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOCUS OF THE FILM

The film highlights a subculture of rural people who, displaced by lack of economic viability in their native regions yet unable to obtain government permission to live in the city, seek to make a life among the toxic and foul waste dumps that surround Beijing. The failure to develop the city of Beijing in a manner that deals responsibly with the problem of waste management has created an ecological and social disaster that creates a stark and alarming disparity between those who live in the cosmopolitan luxury of Beijing's new developments and those who inhabit its fetid and dystopian periphery.

## BACKGROUND

This is an early effort by the same filmmaker who directed *Plastic China*, though this film uses Wang's work as a photographer more centrally. Additionally, it has more of a journalistic/reportage style than the narrative style we see in *Plastic China*.

## KEY LOCATIONS AND PEOPLE

Beijing, China

**Wang Jiuliang** – photographer and filmmaker

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***"Its focus is clear eyed and frank. The shots of people working and living in the often-illegal garbage dumps are routinely heartbreaking."***

***—Planning Magazine***

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What aspects of this film have the most impact in telling the story? The film has a more journalistic/reportage style than a narrative style. How might this have been a different film if it had focused more on following the lifestyles of one or two of the people we see inhabiting the dump sites?
2. Beijing's waste problem arises alongside its economic development and expansion. Must development necessarily lead to an increase in waste?
3. One factor that seems to exacerbate the waste management problem in Beijing is a culture of neglect and apathy toward the consequences of dumping toxic materials near water sources. How might this social issue be addressed?
4. Another fundamental problem seems to be the lack of any long-term plan for managing waste from the city. If you were a government official, what plan might you implement to solve this issue?
5. What are the conditions that make living in metropolitan-area dump sites attractive to some people from rural areas? What forces would cause people to leave behind presumably cleaner, healthier spaces for a life among urban waste?
6. What problems or consequences might arise from building new construction on top of previous dump sites? Might further construction serve only to create even more waste in the future?

## FILM EXCERPTS

Where time is limited, the following excerpts can be screened:

**00:00–05:30** Introduction up to the title

**47:07–54:20** Portrait of people raising animals among the waste

## QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE EXCERPTS

1. Images of waste-laden foregrounds inhabited by people and grazing animals juxtaposed against cranes and the skeletons of luxury residential homes not far beyond suggest not only a stark contrast in people's lifestyles within the same landscape but also the knowledge that these two spheres inevitably impact one another. What kind of environmental and social policies could be enacted now to ensure better lives for all (including animals)?



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*Must development necessarily lead to an increase in waste?*

2. What response do you have to seeing the lifestyle of the people who use the urban periphery as an opportunity to make a living from the cast-off waste of central Beijing? How has this footage impacted your understanding of the social and environmental situation caused by rapid development in Beijing?

## ACTIVITIES

1. Visit a local landfill to find out how it manages waste. Ask about long-term strategies and solutions that are in place. Find out what future challenges are anticipated.
2. Challenge students to make desirable items out of things they otherwise would have thrown away or recycled. Consider holding a “craft fair” event to sell these items to raise money to buy educational materials or to donate to an appropriate non-profit organization.
3. Have students make a documentary film about any local waste management problem that they encounter in their lives.
4. Volunteer to help remove waste from a local site that attracts litter or dumping.
5. Hold a contest to see which member of the class can go the longest without creating any waste. Have all students reflect on the process of becoming aware of every bit of trash they were creating and considering creative ways to avoid doing so.

## SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Learn more about ongoing developments in the Beijing waste management crisis:

“Land shortage in Beijing adds to problem of disposing city’s trash,” Hui Fern Tay, February 4, 2014, [ABC News](#)

“The Burning Problem of China’s Garbage,” February 20, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/02/20/515814016/the-burning-problem-of-chinas-garbage>.

Take a global perspective on the waste crisis. Consider the following resources:

View Candida Brady’s 2012 documentary *Trashed* (featuring actor Jeremy Irons) for a global perspective on wasteful consumerism and pollution.

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“More people, more trash? Rethinking waste from New York to Beijing,”  
Steve Cohen, May 11, 2017,  
<https://www.greenbiz.com/article/more-people-more-trash-rethinking-waste-new-york-beijing>.

*The Zero Waste Solution: Untrashing the Planet One Community at a Time*,  
Paul Connett (2014).

Consider the connection between consumption and waste:

*Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*, Susan Strasser (2000).

*Garbology: Our Dirty Love Affair with Trash*, Edward Humes (2013).

View the 5-minute video that explores Wang Jiuliang’s method of creating a documentary film by combining work in photography and information systems: <https://vimeo.com/188616955>.

## SCENE LIST

0–5 min	Opening sequence. Huge landfill with many scavengers, trucks dumping garbage, and sheep eating garbage, competing with scavengers. Wang Jiuliang, acting as both photographer and narrator, takes a picture and narrates. Says he has photographed many landfills. Aerial shot of landfill. Wang has visited between 400 and 500 landfills around Beijing. Title: <i>Beijing Besieged by Waste</i> .
6–14	Garbage collection and activity at the landfill. Nighttime in a landfill; a man gathers paper and puts it in his wagon. We are in a square/on a street/on a sidewalk/on the highway/near apartments/near office buildings. Garbage arrives by truck and motorcycle. Scavengers pick over garbage. Beijing generates 30,000 tons of waste a day.
14–16	Tattered plastic on fences/kids/dogs/pickers. Narrator: “Some have chosen to live close to the landfills.”
17–23	Expanding dumps, many illegal, close to wealthy urban neighborhoods. Images of the dumps.
24–29	Life in the dumps. Polluted streams. Does anyone care? A wedding party poses for photos with sheep. Wang documents the dumps with a still camera and examines a riverbed coated with garbage.
30–33	Farmers try to grow vegetables and raise ducks despite the pollution. Wang: “They won’t drink the water from here, but they do eat the vegetables that are grown using polluted waters. Beijing must import much of its water.”

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33–36	Unidentified piles of black substances, excrement from buses, sewage from residential areas. No permits. Google images show growing expanse of liquid waste.
37–47	An expanding city, construction waste, rock quarries, and sand mines. Villagers work on building site. Police attend the destruction of a building. Scavengers (Wang says there are 100,000 in Beijing) live and work in construction areas. Many cranes over half-built buildings.
47–54	Scavengers in a small settlement. Wang photographs sheep and cattle grazing in garbage. Residents raise pigs. A woman objects to the camera crew.
55–60	Metal and plastic scavengers at work. Police arrive. A woman objects to being filmed. Another shows the house she built and has lived in for 10 years. Food is scavenged. A woman discusses cost of health care. Ostracism by others. A man dies unnoticed and is laid to rest in a grave dug in landfill.
61–63	Garbage fires. Flames and smoke in the night sky. Wang says economic development is the priority and nobody gives much thought to the waste problem. Wang digs a hole. Many men with jackhammers work. Men erect gigantic forms.
64–68	Two thousand residents evicted as a landfill is redeveloped for an exposition site. Trees and corn are planted on top of the landfill.
69	Street level/Tiananmen Square. Wide shot reveals hundreds of landfill sites. Credits.

