



Plastic China

2016 • Running time 82 minutes • Directed by Wang Jiuliang • Distributed by Journeyman Pictures

Director Wang Jiuliang captures the striking, melancholic beauty of a vast and lifeless artificial landscape—a Chinese countryside covered almost entirely in imported plastic. Men and women build lives upon this waste, and children learn about the outside world through tattered Western advertisements and tabloid images. When she's not building forts beneath massive mounds of plastic or constructing fake computers from magazine cutouts, 11-year-old Yi-Jie dreams of eating real fruits and raising healthy animals, as well as attending school and befriending kids her own age. Her father, an alcoholic, can't afford to pay for her education. But she finds a kindred spirit in the young and optimistic Kun, the local recycling facility owner, who dreams, like she does, of one day escaping the plastic countryside and finding a better life.

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Face to Face Media 2019



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—Ken Berthel

WHY I SELECTED THIS FILM

Plastic China is a film that inspires discussion about a number of salient topics, including globalization, modernity, the rural-urban divide, and the human and environmental impacts of consumerist culture. As all these issues are also raised in fictional works from the Chinese film canon—including Wang Xiaoshuai’s *Beijing Bicycle*, Jia Zhangke’s *The World*, and even Zhang Yang’s *Shower*—presenting *Plastic China* as a testament to the real-life issues to which fictional counterparts refer can enhance the impact of fictional and documentary narratives alike.

This polished and engaging documentary is of value to educators in numerous fields who wish to expose students to the effects of consumption and globalization in China. The film reveals the environmental realities of those who have little choice but to accept life under toxic conditions to support the necessities of life. Several important issues can be approached through this film, such as the rural-urban divide and the impacts of globalization, consumerism, and modernity in China. In a course on Chinese film, this documentary can complement fictional canonical works such as *The World*, *Beijing Bicycle*, *Shower*, and *What Time Is It There?*

SUGGESTED SUBJECT AREAS

Anthropology

Environmental Science

Ethnography

Geography

Global Studies

History

Media Studies

Political Science

SYNOPSIS

Plastic China’s main character, Yi-Jie, is an unschooled 11-year-old girl whose family lives and works in a typical household plastic waste recycling workshop. She learns about the outside world while sorting through the plastic refuse imported from the U.S., Europe, and Japan that surrounds her. Small packs of discarded black powder tell her the bitter taste of “coffee,” and the children’s English learning cards teach her words like “summer” and “Father’s Day”; discarded plastic dolls are her toys. This is her world.

Her father, Peng, had promised to send her to school five years earlier but has not yet delivered on his promise. Instead, he spends much of his hard-earned money from the plastics workshop on alcohol. However, Yi-Jie keeps her wish of going to school one day alive, and we see her holding on to her playful campaign toward learning and schooling. Will she succeed and sit in a classroom and learn? Or will she succeed her parents as an illiterate laborer in a recycling workshop?



Plastic China captures a plaintive sense of the human casualties from unfettered global consumerism.

—Allan Hunter, *Screen Daily*

Kun, the hardworking owner of this plastics recycling center, looks down on Yi-Jie's family, but he also depends on them to do much of the hardest labor. Kun is critical of Peng's drinking and failure to educate his children, and at one point he offers to adopt the girl and give her a better life with him.

Intoxicated by the idealized commercial images of Western lifestyles that he finds online and among the plastic refuse, Kun works day and night, ignoring the physical and mental health problems of his own family just to save for a luxury sedan to increase his status.

Following these families' daily lives, *Plastic China* explores how the work of recycling plastic waste with their bare hands not only takes a toll on the families' health but also drives the cycle of poverty, disease, pollution, and death in unexpected ways.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOCUS OF THE FILM

Plastic China reveals the unsafe conditions in which adults and children alike toil as they seek to eke out a basic living by processing toxic plastic waste products, fully aware that these products are polluting their rivers and lakes, contaminating the air they breathe, and compromising their health in noticeably painful ways. The film exposes not only a disparity between Western lifestyles of consumption and those who deal with the concomitant waste but also in the hierarchy of facility owners and the workers they employ for low compensation in unhealthy and sometimes abusive environments.

REVIEWS

"Director Jiuliang Wang's follow-up to debut documentary *Beijing Besieged by Waste* (2011), *Plastic China*, captures a plaintive sense of the human casualties from unfettered global consumerism. His gently observed portrait of the families toiling at a plastics recycling factory in Shandong builds into a damning commentary on a modern China marked by extreme divides in wealth and opportunity. Wide festival exposure seems assured, particularly at events with a focus on environmental issues, and specialist distribution is a strong possibility." —Allan Hunter, *Screen Daily*

"Wang delicately balances the perspectives of Yi-Jie, her father, and Kun, alternating the child's wonderment in and adaptability to her surroundings with the adults' more grounded, and sad, apprehension of their present circumstances, revealing at the same time a sense of modern-day China coping with inequality in its rapidly developing economy."

—Basil Tsiokos, *All Things Documentary*

“To say that *Plastic China* is an eye-opener is an understatement...The film is a glaring example of the gulf between the haves and have-nots in modern-day China.” —Steve Kopian, Unseen Films



BACKGROUND

This film, completed in 2016, received wide international distribution and helped focus global attention on the toxic working conditions in the plastics recycling industry. In 2018, after years of exposés, the Chinese government declared a ban on mass imports of plastic waste as well as on electronic waste. (See also *Death by Design*.) It is not yet clear what impact the ban will have, whether positive or negative, on the families who were reliant on this work in the past.

KEY LOCATIONS AND PEOPLE

Shandong province, China – site of Kun’s family recycling facility in eastern China

Sichuan province, China – site of Yi-Jie’s home in southwestern China

Kun – plastics recycling facility owner

Peng – Kun’s employee from Sichuan province. An unskilled laborer, he has brought his growing young family thousands of miles from home to take this low-wage job in a hazardous environment.

Yi-Jie – Peng’s eldest daughter. She longs to attend school, and her father has promised to send her once the family returns to their native Sichuan. However, by the end of the film, Yi-Jie is already 11 years old, and the prospects for returning home seem less than promising.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Does this film provide a real-life context for any of the issues raised by any Chinese fiction films that you have seen? Which issues? Which films? How does seeing a film like this affect the way you understand them?
2. Why did the Chinese accept plastic and electronic waste from the West? What impacts has this practice had on those who work with it? What is the impact on the people who export their waste to China? (See Sandra Laville’s article “Chinese ban on plastic waste imports could see U.K. pollution rise,” *The Guardian*, December 7, 2017, and other sources cited in the Supplemental Material section below.)
3. As “amateur archaeologists” sorting through the discarded traces of consumer cultures foreign to their own, what kinds of conclusions have the plastics recycling workers (and their children) reached about the lifestyles of the people who created this waste? Are these impressions accurate? In what ways are they distorted and/or appropriated?



4. We tend to think of recycling as an environmentally protective behavior, yet this film problematizes the simple notion of equating recycling with a better life for all on the planet. What global conditions (such as political, social, and economic) allow for the “green” practice of recycling to actually worsen the living environments of many people?
5. Factory owner Kun firmly believes that education will allow his son to have a better life than he himself has had. In a scene late in the film, he encourages his son to study hard so that he can attend college in Beijing and thus buy a home and car there “to live rich people’s lives.” In equating educational attainment with a greater capacity for material consumption, does Kun unwittingly work to perpetuate the global processes that require many to labor in toxic environments as he has done? What alternative values might he instill in his son that would promote a more environmentally just future for all?
6. Although we are not given much information about Peng’s opportunities back home, it seems clear that his quest to improve his family’s living conditions by taking work in the plastics factory has not been successful. What alternative paths might he have? How would you advise him if you were a friend?

SHORT VERSION

If time is short, a 35-minute edited selection of excerpts can be assigned for viewing or screened in class. The same discussion questions can be used for either the full-length version or the excerpts. For discussion purposes, the clips have been named.

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|--------------------------------|------------|
| 1. Introducing Peng and Yi-Jie | 12 minutes |
| 2. Faraway Dreams | 5 minutes |
| 3. Tensions Flare | 6 minutes |
| 4. Ambitions | 12 minutes |

The 35 minute compilation of excerpts and the full length version are available on the main page for the film.

ACTIVITIES

1. What potentially unhealthy or hazardous conditions can be found in your area? Ask students to document some local problem areas on video, then seek out interviews with anyone who may be able to explain how they happened. Is any action being taken to improve things?

2. Have students visit a plastics recycler near them to find out where the items are sent for processing. Has the recycler been affected by the Chinese ban on plastic waste imports, and if so, how are they responding?
3. Invite guest speakers with expertise in chemistry and biology to describe the chemical components of consumer plastics and how exposure to them affects human health.
4. Instruct students to keep a record of all the plastic waste they produce in a week—even the plastic they recycle. At the end of the week, have them review the list and consider strategies for reducing their usage in the future.
5. Have students bring in a variety of plastic items from their home recycling bins. Challenge the members of the class to come up with creative ways to reuse or repurpose the items instead of recycling them.



SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

- Find critical reviews and links to news stories related to the importation of plastic waste in China at the *Plastic China* website:
<https://www.plasticchina.org/>
- Read about some of the global impacts of China's recent ban on the importation of some types of plastic waste, which took effect in 2018:

"Samoa affected by China's plastic recycling ban," January 25, 2018.
<https://www.radionz.co.nz/international/pacific-20news/348909/samoa-affected-by-china-s-plastic-recycling-ban>

"Recycling chaos in U.S. as China bans 'foreign waste,'" December 9, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/09/568797388/recycling-chaos-in-u-s-as-china-bans-foreign-waste>

“Incentive to innovate: China will no longer take our junk for recycling,” November 16, 2017.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/jamesconca/2017/11/16/china-will-no-longer-take-our-recycled-junk/-17202f9e2122>

“China to U.S.: Please stop sending us your junk,” September 11, 2017.

<http://money.cnn.com/2017/09/11/news/china-scrap-ban-us-recycling/index.html>

- Check out Beth Terry’s 2015 book, *Plastic Free: How I Kicked the Plastic Habit and How You Can Too*.
- For a comparative perspective, see Marco Armiero’s piece, “Garbage Under the Volcano: The Waste Crisis in Campania and the Struggles for Environmental Justice,” in *A History of Environmentalism: Local Struggles, Global Histories*, Marco Armiero and Lise Sedrez (eds.), 2014.
- Watch Wang Jiuliang’s 2008 documentary, *Beijing Besieged by Waste*, for an additional look at the impact of waste on the environment in China.
- Other films:

The World (2004), directed by Jia Zhangke

Shower (1999), directed by Zhang Yang

Beijing Bicycle (2001), directed by Wang Xiaoshuai

What Time Is It There? (2001), directed by Tsai Ming-liang