Beijing Besieged by Garbage

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In the summer of 2008, I returned to my hometown, a small rural village, to take photographs for a project on Chinese folk religions. I needed to find particularly clean natural environments to use as backgrounds for the photographs. But such places are hard to find now. Everywhere, covered by plastic tarps, there is the so-called modern agriculture, which has produced a countless number of discarded pesticide and chemical fertilizer packages scattered across the fields, ditches, and ponds. Herbicides and pesticides together have transformed the once-fertile natural environment into a lifeless one, and the rapidly developing consumerist lifestyle of the villagers has filled the village with piles of nondegradable garbage. The clean and beautiful hometown of my childhood memories—only a decade or two old—is nowhere to be found. This rapid transformation prompted me to start thinking about the problem of garbage brought about by modern civilization.

With the problem of garbage in mind, I started a videographic investigation of the state of garbage pollution around the city of Beijing in October 2008. Before starting this project, questions about the ultimate destination of my own garbage had never even crossed my mind. I started to follow the garbage collection trucks that came to our community every day. The result was shocking. I learned, for starters, that there was an enormous refuse landfill site only seven kilometers away from where I live. And, only one kilometer away from that putrid landfill, a large residential compound was under construction. With my eyes on the high-rise buildings under construction, I lamented the proximity of the landfills to our city. On maps of Beijing, however, there is no indication of any of these large-scale refuse landfills, although they are intimately connected with each of our lives.
My investigation revealed that 11 large-scale refuse landfills affiliated with the municipal environmental sanitation services system are scattered around the close suburbs of Beijing. Each landfill occupies tens of hectares of land, some of which have grown into mountains of garbage over 50 meters high. Out of concern for individual rights and interests, protests against these landfills have been steady; despite such efforts, the landfills grow taller and taller.

I learned that, in actuality, the garbage we produce does not all go to legitimate, government-affiliated refuse landfills. A considerable amount of the garbage is channeled to the so-called underground garbage industrial chain. This garbage is purchased at a low price within the city, transported outside the city center, and sorted by scavengers employed for this task. This is how so many illegal garbage sites have come into existence in hidden corners of the city. The particular details of their geographical distribution are effectively unknown, as are their exact numbers.

At first, I did not know where these illegal dump sites were. So, I rode my motorcycle and followed suspicious-looking garbage trucks. This is how I found the first few garbage dump sites. I carefully studied the visual characteristics of these garbage dump sites and used this information to find similar sites on satellite photographs of greater Beijing, marking every location that might be a potential dump site. Then, I went to each of the noted locations and confirmed their status. Using this method, I identified hundreds of illegal garbage dump sites one after another.

People involved in one way or another with the illegal dump sites, in the interest of keeping their trade clandestine, are quite cautious toward outsiders. Because people with cameras on their backs are especially unwelcome, it was impossible to shoot freely at these sites. In fact, I was frequently refused entrance, berated, chased by wolfhounds, or threatened with cooking knives. Several times I was kept hostage and my photographs were deleted from my cameras. In order to photograph these dump sites in detail, I was, therefore, forced come up with creative solutions. Sometimes I pretended that I was there to repurpose garbage and looked for opportunities to take pictures when I was granted entrance. More often than not, I engaged in a kind of guerrilla warfare with the guards, quickly shooting pictures and leaving when they were not paying attention. I also looked for commanding heights, such as treetops, or high-voltage electricity poles, where I could take pictures that captured the entirety of a site including its surroundings.

The conditions of these illegal dump sites are appalling. Perhaps only when you stand amid them, can you feel the immensity of the garbage. It often occupies tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of square meters of land and is over ten meters deep. At first, when I stood on garbage piles that were sticky, slippery, loose, and soft, I did not dare to move, fearing that I might be devoured by the refuse. The air was rank with a thick stench. I got dizzy and experienced headaches after less than ten minutes. The dump sites are so full of flies in the summer that the faces of anyone in the vicinity are covered with them, and the flies are impossible to drive away. Many scavengers work in such conditions, with no protection whatsoever, not even a breathing mask.
I have great respect for these scavengers. Although they are in an ancient and humble trade, deep in their hearts they harbor the hope and dream of a better life. To understand their lives at a deeper level, I lived at the largest construction waste site for three months. At its peak, more than 2,000 migrant peasant workers lived there, in make-shift shacks built from materials scavenged from construction waste. Women, using hooks, poked around for small objects of value from the waste, and men, swinging huge hammers in their hands, smashed concrete blocks to collect any steel inside. As the sweat of the adults infused the site, the place was also filled with the laughter and commotion of children playing and running around.

My photography of this waste site began with the children of the scavengers. When I gave the developed pictures to the children, they ran to show them to their parents. Even at a distance, I could clearly see the smiles on their parents’ faces. As many of the children here had never had their pictures taken before, I was received by the community with particular respect. (Nothing is more encouraging than bringing happiness with a camera in your hand. This is far more rewarding than working on exquisite and highbrow “art.”) As I took these pictures, I learned that almost all of the children younger than ten had spent their childhoods on the dump site. Any understanding of the outside world they had had been gleaned from the tiny televisions in their homes. On these dump sites, the children scavenge for toys and play barefoot in the garbage. Even though these dump sites are in many ways barren, there is a kind of irrepressible weedlike vitality there that often exuded passion and confidence toward life!

While the scavengers are confined to these dump sites to construct their dreams for a better life, people living in the city continue to engage in a carnival of consumption that grows ever more intense. The city is expanding, the population is on the rise, levels of consumption are growing, and so the production of garbage is less and less likely to diminish.

Up to the end of 2010, I visited five hundred dump sites, one after another, covering 15,000 kilometers in and around Beijing. I took more than ten thousand photographs and shot over 60 hours of video footage. In these pictures, I did not focus on the squalid and chaotic details of the dump sites. Instead, my emphasis was on the relationship between these dump sites and the surrounding natural environment and conditions of human life. Therefore, I chose to point my lens from the dump sites toward the outside, or to leave the dump sites and ascertain their effects from higher and more removed perspectives. When I saw from high and afar the pollution of the rivers caused by these dump sites, I felt closely the water crisis that Beijing currently suffers. When I saw herds of sheep and cows grazing in these dump sites, and knew that almost all of the pigs were fed with restaurant waste from all over the city, I felt a deep concern for our food safety. Standing within these garbage sites, looking at the high-rise buildings under construction nearby, I thought, maybe the tidy streets and beautiful communities are only pleasant illusions. It is the dump sites, on the contrary, that are the reality behind the facade of the city.

Many of us believe that we are completely disconnected from the garbage we produce once it has left our sight. Few realize that their garbage has not gone far. The garbage, albeit in a different form, always comes back and casts a perpetual shadow over our lives. My photographs, together with my on-site interviews, serve as detailed archives of the dump sites that are surrounding Beijing. They reveal to people the basic fact that we are literally surrounded and besieged by garbage, and they draw attention to
this issue, hopefully prompting some viewers to reflect on their own daily consumption practices. No one can deny that we are creating an economic miracle above ground; yet, we are also creating a world of garbage under it.

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