

# Plastic China

DIRECTED BY JIU-LIANG WANG

Produced by CNEX, Beijing TYC, and Oriental Companion Media

82 minutes, Color, 2016

Languages: Yi and Mandarin Chinese

A part of The Global Environmental Justice Collection

Teacher's Guide available at <https://tinyurl.com/y5qbcehj>.

Reviewed by Matt Logan

A man picks through acres of smoldering plastic. Source: Images here and on next page are screen captures for the film on Amazon at <https://tinyurl.com/yy32prfv>.

*Plastic China*, a 2016 film from director Jiu-Liang Wang, tells the story of a small recycling factory in Shangdong Province, China. The film's title suggests a broad coverage of China's massive plastic recycling sector, but rather we are given a glimpse into the operation of one small, apparently totally unregulated, recycling factory and the families that live and work there amid the endless seas of plastic and plumes of black smoke emanating from buildings, chimneys, and the ground itself, all with the everpresent sound of crinkling plastic, crying babies, and yelling children.

The film's main protagonist is Yi Jie, a ten-year-old girl from Sichuan Province. Toward the end of the film, Yi Jie proudly exclaims, "I'm small but mighty," and at another point, she watches the popular American cartoon *Dora the Explorer* in an effort to learn English. She repeats after Dora: "big, little, big, little." In one of the last scenes of the film, we see her dwarfed by massive skyscrapers as her family attempts to purchase a train ticket home—a ticket that they come to find they can't afford. *Plastic China* is filled with juxtapositions like this, as it attempts to show us the on-the-ground experience of Kun, the owner of a small recycling factory, Ti Jie's father Ping, and the rest of their families.

The daily lives of the people in the film are harrowing. No care is taken to prevent inhalation of burning plastic, no shoes or gloves are worn as the children and adults sift through bags labeled in English "hazardous waste," and food is cooked over flames fueled by burning plastic—even a newborn baby is exposed to these terrible conditions. At various points in the film, the health of the families is addressed. Kun, not even thirty years old, has counted three tumors on his body. Ping has turned to alcohol abuse as a form of escape from the hard work and brutal conditions. The children simply run around, jump in, and sort through the plastic looking for toys or reading material, without concern for injury.

The film doesn't cast judgments at the characters, and it spares direct judgment of the authorities as well, both local and national. "Chairman Mao," as he is referred to in the film, is neither celebrated nor criticized, though the children in the factory clearly have no idea who he is. Wang does use visual irony to softly critique issues like inequality within Chinese society, global inequality, and the lack of regulation in China. Presumably this is the only way he, a Chinese filmmaker, can get in even the subtlest of critiques of China and its government. Clearly, however soft the critiques are, this film is meant as a wake-up call to both the Chinese Communist

Party and to the international community. Simply recycling isn't enough, the film seems to implore. We often throw our water bottles into the green or blue bin and feel like we've really accomplished something. But perhaps, Wang suggests, there's a lot more work to be done behind the scenes, and not just in regard to plastic waste. It seems that Wang may fear that intelligent, hardworking young people like Yi Jie are in danger of being "wasted" by China, much like the plastic that lies strewn about across the landscape of the film. Judging from the success Wang's 2011 film *Beijing Besieged by Waste* had in exposing trash dumps surrounding Beijing, this film may do the same for the recycling industry and the people who work in that sector in China.

Some movies can stand in as teachers, as they present material with facts, figures, and helpful context that students can use to access a new topic. *Plastic China* is not that sort of film. Instead, it would serve as an excellent conversation starter or case study about the problems of globalization; challenges presented by rapid growth in China; the role of government safety regulations; the impact of the large-scale displacement of families due to large-scale rural-to-urban migration in China; the role of education in developing countries, particularly for girls; and the complicated nature of the recycling supply chain. In fact, it's one of the most widely applicable films I've seen in terms of the variety of issues it could be used to address. The film is ideal for AP Human Geography or world/regional geography, as it directly addresses multiple standards from a variety of units, but it would also fit nicely in an environmental science course.

The film is appropriate only for mature high school students and college students, as there is some language, brief incidental child nudity, and emotionally challenging situations. The pace of the movie will feel slow for some students not accustomed to this style of narrative-free documentary filmmaking, so teachers may wish to choose sections of the film (or use an excerpted thirty-five-minute version) rather than show the entire eighty-two-minute version. Those students who have the maturity to watch and appreciate the movie will be rewarded with an eye-opening, and ultimately affirming, experience that shows how the "other half" lives in China and just where all those water bottles we recycle actually end up.

*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



Yi Jie, her brother Ah Zi, and the boss's son QiQi look for discarded plastic toys.



Yi Jie looks on as her mother takes a break to feed her newborn baby sister.

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.

The film is available through The Global Environmental Justice Collection along with teacher’s guide to use the film in the classroom. The guide contains a wealth of discussion questions, a glossary of key locations and people in the film, supplemental materials for further research, a list of possible activities to pair with the film, additional film selections, and a description of an excerpted thirty-five-minute version for teachers who wish to show the film but do not have sufficient instructional time. The guide will also serve to orient the teacher to salient issues in the film that they may wish to preview with students prior to watching. With the guide, the film is immediately useable for teachers who have little or no background knowledge in issues relating to recycling, environmental justice, or China’s role in the plastics recycling supply chain. ■

**MATT LOGAN** has taught AP US Government and Politics, US History in Film, AP Human Geography, World Geography, and World History at LaFayette High School in LaFayette, GA and, currently, Harrison High School in Kennesaw, GA. He has earned grants, awards, and scholarships from the College Board, the American Geographical Society, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History, and others. He currently serves on the Bill of Rights Institute’s Teacher Council and is a Table Leader for the AP US Government and Politics Exam Reading.

## *Plastic China* | Post-Viewing Questions

by Matt Logan

After viewing the film *Plastic China*, you may have questions about what you saw. Where did all that plastic come from? Why did it end up in China? What is China doing to address the problems seen in the film? By reading the following article, you will be able to answer many of your questions.



### Piling Up: How China’s Ban on Importing Waste Has Stalled Global Recycling

*China’s decision to no longer be the dumping ground for the world’s recycled waste has left municipalities and waste companies from Australia to the U.S. scrambling for alternatives. But experts say it offers an opportunity to develop better solutions for a growing throwaway culture.*

BY CHERYL KATZ | MARCH 7, 2019

#### Task

Navigate to *Piling Up* from Yale Environment 360 at <https://tinyurl.com/y5rg6onc>, and read the article. Then come back and answer the following questions.

1. Describe China’s “National Sword Policy.”
2. What consequences might the National Sword Policy have for the exporting of plastic waste and plastic recycling outside of China?
3. Why did the US, Europe, and others send such a high percentage of their recyclables to China prior to the National Sword policy?
4. What are some solutions for limiting plastic use and plastic waste discussed in the article? Do you have any ideas that you would add?
5. *Plastic China* was released in 2016, and China’s National Sword policy went into effect in 2017. Do you think National Sword will fix the problems seen in the film? Why or why not?