# Waste and Value Conference

# Abstracts

## Table of Contents

# Living with Plastics in Japan: Societal Impact of Resource Circulation of Plastics Act (2021)

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## Abstract

Between 1988 and 2016, Japan had the third highest rate of plastic waste exports in the world (following Hong Kong and the US), and 70% of these exports were shipped to China. This longstanding trend was abruptly halted by the 2018 Chinese ban on the import of scrap plastic and the 2019 amendment to the Basel Convention, subjecting international trade of scrap plastic to tighter controls and greater transparency. The promulgation in 2021 of a new piece of legislation, the Plastic Resource Circulation Act, was aimed to deal with the problems that the new geopolitical situation brought about for Japan. The law highlighted the need for the new solutions for plastic reduction to address not only the waste management side of the problem, but to tackle the entire chain of production and consumption, including product design, daily routines and consumer consciousness. The objective of this paper is to assess the effectiveness of the Plastic Resource Circulation Act two years after its implementation.

The academic relevance of this case is obvious. Japan ranks second globally in terms of plastic packaging waste generation per capita, after the United States. It is not only a huge market for Single Use Plastics, but also, in many respects, a trend-setter for the Chinese, Korean and Southeast Asian consumer cultures. For example, the expansion of Japanese retailers overseas is reported to have contributed to the popularisation of Japanese packaging conventions, altering local expectations and practices.

The roots of the problem do not lie in the traditional penchant for wrapping, as is often mistakenly claimed, but are directly linked to the quest for end-markets for plastic resins during the 1950s and 1960s. While a relative latecomer on the global stage, the Japanese petrochemical industry expanded at a spectacular tempo, recording a whopping 587 percent increase of plastic production between 1955 and 1961. This remarkable development took place under a watchful eye of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry, committed to nurturing high-added-value sectors of the economy. The government did not allow technology imports that were accompanied by foreign managerial control and introduced protective tariffs on foreign imports of plastics to give an advantage to domestic producers. Other regulatory tools included tax benefits, preferential loans, and exemption from customs duties on imported machinery. Cartels were commonly used to prevent overcapacity and excess competition. This system of ‘industrial cooperation’ allowed a large number of firms to survive, all producing in plants that were small by global standards, making the Japanese products internationally uncompetitive. Thus, domestic industries – mainly electronics and automobiles, along with synthetic fibers and packaging – were the primary end-market of the skyrocketing output of the Japanese petrochemical industry. Coinciding with this spectacular growth was the dissemination of the ideal of the American middle-class lifestyle represented by the culture of disposability. Combined, these two factors facilitated the integration of Single Use Plastics into the very fabric of daily life in Japan that has continued until the present day.

# The Green Helper: Migrant Domestic Workers, Plastic Waste Recycling and Ecological Identities in Asia

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## Abstract

Existing research on Southeast Asia foreign domestic workers (FDWs) has explored issues of labor exploitations in global capitalism (Chang and Lin, 2010), gender problems under regional inequalities (Constable, 1997, 2009), sexuality explorations and activisms (Lai, 2021). Not enough attention, however, has been paid to these migrant workers identity and work in relation to questions of climate change, and in particular, the topic of waste. This pilot research asks these questions: How do Filipino and Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong understand plastic pollution and climate change across Asia? Do they link these concerns with their household labor of waste disposal and waste recycling? Drawing on survey data, combined with semi-structured interviews and short film screening, with about 100 domestic helpers in Hong Kong in 2024, we aim to understand how FDW understand the above questions when gathering for their Sunday holidays in open spaces of Central and Causeway Bay. The paper is the first scholarly attempt to understand the complex relations between waste disposal practices, ecological knowledge, and environmental identities among FDW across Asia. We have a preliminary finding that FDW in Hong Kong care about the environment a lot and they take their daily chores of waste sorting and disposal seriously, playing the role of what we call "green helpers." Second, FDW's heightened consciousness and practice of waste sorting could be understood in an inter-Asia, even global, context, where serious plastic pollution and improving environmental governance in the Philippines hometown intersect with globally circulating environmental discourses of climate change, and with more advanced waste recycling policy and reward system in developed cities such as Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Postcolonial perception about woman helpers as low status laborers, however, prevents most of us to understand the ecological values and environmental agencies in their daily material practices

## The rise and fall of a Buddhist environmental movement: Hòa Hảo Buddhism and the plastic waste crisis in the Mekong Delta

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### Abstract

Hòa Hảo Buddism (Phật Giáo Hòa Hảo) is a religious tradition based in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam that blends nationalism, ancestor worship, and Buddhism. After a long time of being marginalized in the Vietnamese religious landscape, the Hòa Hảo religion is now seeking opportunities for revival, and a plastic crisis presents one such opportunity. Plastic waste blocks water flows, suffocates aquatic plants and animals, contaminates water and soil, and causes small-scale environmental disasters all over the Mekong Delta. Witnessing the birthplace of their religion choking with plastic and other waste, Hòa Hảo Buddhist leaders have joined forces with local and national state bodies to clean up polluted areas. They have embraced environmentalism and developed a new waste management model in order to deal with the crisis.

A local Hòa Hảo temple in Cần Thơ City received a national prize in 2019 from the Vietnam Fatherland Front for its model "Waste management, waste processing plant, tree planting and fire extinguisher". Building upon this success, the model has been introduced to many Hòa Hảo temples and villages in the Mekong Delta. Several Hòa Hảo temples mobilized volunteers to take part in collective action such as cleaning up public spaces, planting flowers and trees to create beautiful scenery landscapes, and protecting clean water areas from waste and litter. The Head of Central Executive Committee of Hòa Hảo Buddhism has initiated several other local movements, encouraged followers to stop littering in rivers and canals, and distributed rubbish bins to households to separate organic and solid waste. In fact, the Hòa Hảo Buddhist Church has utilized the same propaganda machine and methods as the Vietnamese state for raising environmental awareness of plastic pollution.

Based on fieldwork data and semi-structured interviews with Buddhist leaders, local scientists, waste management officers, and Buddhist volunteers, this paper shows what does and does not work in acting against plastic crisis in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. As I have observed, solving the waste crisis provided Hòa Hảo leaders with a good cause and an opportunity to form political networks with state actors. Hòa Hảo priests could call for action against pollution, organize training courses to raise environmental awareness, and to propagate a green Dharma based on their founders' teachings. But they engaged with waste briefly and turned their back on tackling pollution when other challenges, such as the Covid pandemic, appeared. I argue that Hòa Hảo religion's approach may be effective in forging performative environmentalism through volunteerism to reduce waste. Yet it has not been successful in transforming Buddhists' behaviours towards sustainable consumption, as well as towards a future of net-zero plastic.

## Message is a Bottle: Plastics, Connections, and the Stories of Things on an Indian Ocean Island

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### Abstract

The increasing speed of capitalism over the last seventy years has relied on material support, best exemplified by capitalism's own wunderkind material: plastics. Although an increasing number of plastics, since the mid 1950s onwards, have been made to be used and discarded as if they were essentially ephemeral, plastics have a materiality that stubbornly persists. On Christmas Island, an Australian external territory, temporal cycles are partly defined by the monthly arrivals of packaged food on ships and the bi-weekly arrival of planes carrying fresh food, locals, workers, tourists, and medicine. The predictable rhythms of the Gregorian calendar recede with the start of the rainy season, as planes become unable to land on a rainy days and ships can't dock during the seasonal swell. The Lunar calendar determines deep temporal connections for the local Chinese and Malay communities, including festivals that make offerings to the island's ancestors and to those trapped in the realm of the hungry ghosts. As the rainy season begins and following the cycles of the moon, the red crab migration changes life on the island by blocking roads, prompting care, and affecting the workings of the island's phosphate mine. This paper will look at how people on Christmas Island perceive time in relation to the technologies and economies that plastics have co-produced. It will look specifically at how the movements of animals, people, and ancestors and ghosts are disrupted and supported by the use and presence of plastics. Engaging the ambivalences that many people have towards the plastics, I will look at how plastic items hitch rides on ocean currents, tie nations together through economic and material relations, and are embedded within religious traditions and cosmological understandings.

## The in/disposable: on excess, endurance and endings

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### Abstract

This paper revisits two of our previous engagements with things that would conventionally be categorized as waste. Our curatorial experiments with this waste material explored their epistemological, aesthetic and ethical potentials, but in this paper, we wish to discuss what happens to the value of disposable things as an ontological category if we begin to pay attention to them, care for them and even repurpose them. We do this by drawing on our previous work with such ontological misfits, respectively *Insignificants* (Sørensen) and *fringe objects* (Grünfeld).

*Insignificants* was a collection and exhibition experiment taking place between 2019 and 2020. The format of the exhibition series was deliberately neglectable, limited to a small bell jar. Inside the jar, a selection of things dislodged from cultural-historical relations were exhibited in an effort to stage new encounters and explore the aesthetic and epistemic qualities of insignificant things. While *fringe objects* share a similar ontological status as insignificant and neglectable, they differ in one important respect as the term refers specifically to things already residing in a museum collection, yet located at its margins as byproducts of the collecting practice. *Fringe objects* embody cultural-historical relations but curators have deemed them disposable because such relations are too weak or unimportant. However, through a transdisciplinary exhibition experiment at Medical Museion – *The Living Room* – involving more-than-human actors, *fringe objects* became important ingredients in the making of metabolic things, thus evolving as sites for an uncertain disposal beyond museum binaries such as accessioning/deaccessioning.

In each their own way, *Insignificants* and *fringe objects* left us perplexed about their future trajectories. When our experiments ceased, it became particularly pertinent for us to explore the futures of the things we had curated. We end this paper discussing these excessive endings and how their uncertainties called for us to do slightly weird and unsettling things. For example, at the end of the experiment in 2020, *Insignificants* were formally buried (rather than discarded), but eventually the interred objects happened to be re-excavated, forming a new and unexpected curatorial context. Meanwhile, an installation of fringe objects was excavated in 2023 only to pose further problems as it turned into an unruly thing, dispersing well beyond the confines of its installation case. These experiences prompt us to consider how the effects of paying attention to, caring for and repurposing such mutable things turns the already chronically unstable category of the disposable into an ontological misfit of its own: the in/disposable.

# Consuming Buddhist Excess: Life Stories of Rot, Loss, and Reuse from Japan's Temple Kitchens

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on ritual economies of food in Japanese Buddhism and ways in which value and waste are generated within them, a subject firmly located in the contemporary discourses and realities of consumption and the global environmental crisis. Food is one of the most common donations in Buddhism in Japan and it is meant to be consumed by temple priests, their families, and temple communities on behalf of the buddhas. As offerings, food becomes incorporated into the Buddhist ritual economies of meritorious giving and becomes charged with spiritual value. By tracing how food circulates through Buddhist ritual economies, I will explore how and when food donations generate the excess of edible gifts. In depopulating communities struggling with the seasonal overproduction of food, such gifts become particularly troublesome. In accumulation, they are both markers of spiritual potency and material excess en route to becoming wasteful. Almost half of Japan's estimated five million metric tons of food waste is generated annually in household kitchens, including Buddhist temple kitchens. By asking how food excess is managed in Buddhist temples, I map out what, when, and where can morally become waste and consider the importance of Buddhist edible gifts for the wider issues of food loss, consumption, recycling, and aspirational non-waste economies in contemporary Japan. In doing so, I seek to broaden the definition of environmental care.

## The Festival Tent: Bargain, Shelter and Discard

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**Abstract**

### Introduction

There is little doubt that festival tents have significant environmental implications. Annually, an estimated 250,000 tents are abandoned at music festivals in the UK alone, with an average of 50,000 tents left at the Danish Roskilde festival. The majority of these discarded tents end up in landfills. If the average tent weighs 3.5 kg, it is equivalent to discarding 8,750 straws or 250 plastic cups, according to The Association of Independent Festivals (2019) [1]. To comprehend the scale, it is noteworthy that an average fes:val tent has been estimated to possess a carbon footprint of approximately 25-35 kg carbon dioxide, equivalent to charging 1,400 smartphones (Julien, 2019; KnowCarbon, n.d.) [2].

### Goals & Methods

Employing an Actor-Network Theory (ANT) inspired framework (Latour, 2007)[3], this paper argues that the festival tent is emblematic of the complex and evolving relationship between waste and value in contemporary western society. Firstly, the festival tent serves as a prism through which the capitalist logic becomes exposed, thriving on a low-margin, high-turnover ethos, nurtured by a disposable mindset. As part of annual festival package offers, bargain value is attributed to the festival tent, extensively advertised in promotional materials.

Secondly, the festival tent showcases a product life cycle so brief that even mayflies must marvel, and manufacturers cheer in the background. The price is low and the quality so inferior, that consumers do not care or do not need to take care of the product. With zippers malfunctioning, tent fabric so fragile that it is prone to easy damage, and stakes' tips falling off at the slightest disturbance, the festival tent itself affords (Norman, 1999)[4] no one to care. 'Who cares'; it is an integral part of the festival's liminality (Tuner 1969)[5] and carnivalesque (Bakh:n, 1984[6]) atmosphere and joyous mentality, blending perfectly together with a laissez faire economy.

Arguably, the festival tent also harbors potential for its own re-valuation. As a physical and existential shelter (Kracauer, 1998)[7], it provides refuge from weather, people, sensory stimuli, and a much-needed (thinking) break. The thin tent fabric offers a sense of security, privacy, and seclusion, despite the fact that the tent easily is torn, cut, burned, or ripped open. The tent also marks territory on a festival ground without obvious borders, and it is associated rituals of conquering land and manifestations of communities, framed by tent camps scattered on the festival site.

### Conclusion

In less than a week, the festival tent transitions from a retail commodity to a community base and existential shelter, providing protection from the weather, sensory overload, and other

people. In both cases it is valued, however the logic behind the perceived benefits differs considerable. Eventually, the festival tent is discarded and left with indifference. Few festival goers seem to lose sleep or mourn over abandoned festival tents; they have been deemed worthless.

## Further work

Examining the production of the festival tents and assessing the working conditions associated with a low- margin, high-turnover regime would be an interesting and natural addition to the sociological analysis of the festival tent.

# Menstruation, the body and sanitary waste: menstrual products as moral materialities in Sankhu, Nepal

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## Abstract

In Nepal, menstruation is a problematic substance and during menstruation, women must follow various customs, such as avoiding temples and participation in daily activities. In the Kathmandu Valley, there are significant changes concerning attitudes towards menstruation due to rising activism and national initiatives, producing an ideal type of the 'modern woman'. However, studies on menstruation in Nepal tend to focus on access to sanitation facilities and products, with an assumption on menstruation as a rural problem. For 12 months, I undertook ethnographic fieldwork in the ancient Newar town of Sankhu and surrounding villages in Shankharapur municipality on the northeast of the Kathmandu Valley to investigate the lived experiences of menstruation and sanitary waste. Menstruating bodies in Sankhu hold a perplexing status: hidden and potentially dangerous to the home and broader community while an indication of reproductive potential and female propriety. What emerges is that menstruation is more problematic in Newar society compared to other forms of bodily discard, such as hair, blood or spit. Consequently, there are alternative waste disposal practices for managing sanitary waste that influence the choice of menstrual products. In this paper, I focus on the qualities and properties of sanitary waste to reveal the moral actions and ethical understandings surrounding menstruation in Sankhu and Shankharapur. Moving beyond Mary Douglas's pollution theory on how menstruation is symbolic of 'matter-out-of-place', I mobilise the concept of 'moral materialities' to explore the affective, multiple and transformative relationships to menstruation and menstrual products. This paper seeks to illustrate contemporary practices and understandings of menstruation and sanitary waste in Sankhu while reflecting on what this can reveal concerning gender, religion and waste.

# From mindless consumerism to mindful moderation: Reconfiguration of Buddhist votive offering practices

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## Abstract

Rapidly transforming socio-economic circumstances have produced different discourses of development and modernity in Bhutan. Consistent with the provenance of the Bhutanese governance in the duality of the secular and religious authorities, the dramatic structural changes underway in Bhutan have constituted a change in religious practices too. At its peak, constitutive votive offerings and food consumption in Bhutanese religious movements have been characterised by a newfound penchant for packaged and imported offering materials. This paper discusses how the materials of votive offerings reflected historical emphasis on moderation and proportionality in conducting public and private affairs. Such materials and discourses, through statutory and customary mechanisms, enforced pre-existing solidarities not just among different sections and regions of the Bhutanese populace, but also between the people and the more-than-human inhabitants of the Bhutanese landscape. In corollary, this study seeks to contribute to the growing literature on how Buddhist modernism has not only engaged with modern environmental science in reforming potentially extractive doctrinal and institutional practices, but also realigning the materiality and discourses of ritual offerings with the pre-existing solidarities, and social norms and ideals.

# The Conceptualization of Tri Hita Karana in the Interpretation and Handling of Waste among Balinese Hindus

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## Abstract

This paper studies the interpretation and handling of waste among Balinese Hindus by examining how religious teachings, such as Tri Hita Karana, influence the understanding of both everyday waste and religiously produced waste. The study of waste in a Balinese Hindu context from the perspective of religious studies is a field that few has examined. Hence, this paper seeks to address this gap in the research based on an analytical framework that draws on waste as a category and the concept of sacred waste. This involves studying the disposability, materiality and biography of an object as well as its potential environmental and spiritual pollution. While the concept of sacred waste implies that religiously produced waste requires precarious discarding practices, this research has found that an expansion of the concept is necessary when studying banten. Banten are Balinese offerings that are meant to be made out of organic materials, based on the teachings of Tri Hita Karana, which represents a belief that humans are obliged to be in harmony with all of God's creations. Thus, it is often interpreted as an environmentally aware philosophy. This understanding of Balinese Hinduism may have been an accurate representation of the religious practices and materiality of waste earlier, but as modern consumer culture has gained traction, with most produced food items packaged in plastic, the reality is quite different today. The materiality of regular and sacred waste has thus changed, for example causing banten to contain plastic and other non-organic components. Through field work and conversations with a local environmental NGO, this paper has found, that while the materiality of waste has changed, the interpretation of waste among Balinese Hindus has not and is still influenced by the "green" philosophies of Tri Hita Karana. This paper has moreover found that the spiritual orientation that prevails Balinese Hindus' world view causes ideas of spiritual pollution, which consequently influences the interpretation and handling of waste. Moreover, literature and essays on Balinese Hinduism has laid the groundwork for the understanding of the field, together with a general background knowledge of the culture and religion due to my own familial relation and upbringing to and on the island. This has opened up for a unique and detailed insight into Balinese Hinduism that otherwise would be hard to acquire through just literature. However, it is also important to bear in mind that research is never neutral, and that the information gathered may be biased or lack breadth. Nevertheless, the understanding and knowledge of the complexities of Balinese Hindus, which has been gained from the in-depth research, adds valuable perspectives to the analysis and conclusions of this paper. This thoroughness is necessary in order to answer the research question of why an apparently "green" and harmonious religion can have such conflicting practices regarding waste management. The evidence is clear – Bali is facing an environmental crisis – and in order to solve these problems, an understanding for the cultural and religious influence on people's interpretation and handling of waste is needed.

## Bone, Ash, Soil, Dust: Making ‘sacred remains’ and ‘necro-waste’ in Australia and Japan

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**Abstract:**
The dead body is a very particular kind of matter, one that sits uneasily within and against the cultural category of ‘waste’ and which customarily demands ritualised practices of disposal. Treating bodies as regular waste can be indicative not simply of disrespect, but of a denial of the dead’s personhood (Butler 2015 on ‘grievability’) and our shared humanity (see, for example, the case of Abu Ghraib or more recently, cemeteries in Palestine). As Thomas W. Laqueur (2015), in his epic cultural history of mortal remains, thus argues, “the dead body matters, everywhere and across time as well as in particular times and particular places”. Simultaneously, however, scholars of death and technology (Olson 2016; Troyer 2016) have shown that the regular work of morticians, cremators, and other deathcare professionals produces various excesses – arterial blood, metal implants, etc. – that are not treated as sacred, buy disposed of covertly as “necro-waste”.
This paper explores the seemingly unassailable gulf and contentious boundaries between sacred ‘remains’ and profane ‘waste’ to suggest that deathcare professionals play an active, creative role in making the dead. I further argue that the border between these categories is far more malleable and venerable than Laqueur’s universal statements on the inherent value of human remains would suggest. To illustrate this, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in two very different cultural and religious context for cremation, Australia and Japan, where I have worked alongside cremation and cremulation (‘bone crushing’) professionals over an extended period. In each context, through physical processes of fragmenting, shifting, washing, and sorting, the dead person is located in certain matter and excluded from other matter. The ethnography describes what systems of value and sensory experiences workers use to make these fine-grained decisions.
These processes are almost entirely hidden from the view of the public, who encounter the dead only as the ‘end product’ of bone (in Japan) or ash (in Australia). I suggest thus that the special status awarded to human remains is at least in part a result of a commodity fetish, born of people’s alienation from remains within a capitalist system of deathcare. Obscuring the labours of production that go into making human remains and making necro-waste has a variety of negative impacts, including for the welfare of the workers and for their capacity to address larger environmental and political externalities of necro-waste.

# Incinerator anatomy
# Respectful Disposal practices at the UK-based High Temperature Waste Incinerators

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**Abstract**
The paper addresses the need for examining the procedure of disposing of human body parts at the UK-based High Temperature Waste Incinerators (HTWIs). HTWI remains a key technology for disposing of waste considered harmful, and therefore requires a close-up examination in terms of its ritualistic practices, such as respectful disposal.

A High Temperature Waste Incinerator (HTWI) is different to a typical municipal waste incinerator in operating at a higher temperature and having a permit to dispose of a much broader range of feedstock, including radioactive, medical, chemical, confiscated and anatomical wastes. The latter category consists of human torsos, heads and limbs, mostly imported into the UK for research and subsequently packaged in plastic drums and sent for disposal at HTWIs.

The study focuses on the spatial, technological and material organisation of respectful disposal – the procedure of sending anatomical waste into the incineration chamber 'with the dignity and respect accorded to human bodies', as advised in the guidance by the UK's Human Tissue Authority (2016). The research zooms into the HTWI's infrastructural features, considered by the facility's staff as critical for respectful disposal: the 'comblift' and the 'chargebox'. The former is a mechanism for vertically transporting and tipping waste containers, whereas the latter is a space immediately before the incineration chamber.

The study is based on fieldwork at four waste incineration sites. The findings primarily come from walk-along interviews with staff, worker observation and graphic anthropology. The latter method, used both in the form of field sketches and as presentational drawings, assists in visually communicating the spatio-material organisation of respectful disposal.

Three main approaches to respectful disposal are identified in this study. In its most basic form, the procedure requires for the human remains to be sent into the incineration chamber via the comblift separately from any other type of waste. A more advanced protocol, sometimes prescribed by the waste supplier, involves a facility's operative manually placing the drums containing the body parts into the chargebox. An even more considerate category of respectful disposal is where a priest is invited to give final rites to the anatomical waste before it is burnt.

Several observations emerge from the study. The procedure of respectful disposal temporarily changes the use of two technological entities: the comblift and the chargebox. Neither the external appearance nor the internal organisation of a HTWI is purposefully related or

designed for mortuary rites. The procedure is conducted by waste managers, chemists and engineers: professionals not trained in post-mortem disposal and busy dealing with many dangerous waste types, other than anatomical. Being concealed and anonymous, the process of respectful disposal does not appear to facilitate a peaceful transition of the deceased's souls, as assessed through the prism of transcultural death ritual observations by Robert Hertz (1905) and his followers.

The study begins to unpack the nature of the spatial practices behind respectful disposal, providing a contribution to death and infrastructure studies, as well as supplying insights for design and operation of the future HTWIs.

# The untapped value of vacant buildings in rural Denmark

**Jack O'Hagan and Bodil Eiterstraum**

Independent Researchers

Field: Architecture

## Abstract

This paper intricately explores the dynamic relationship between waste and value, specifically centering on the latent potential within abandoned buildings scattered across rural Danish towns. These structures, often dismissed as vast pieces of waste, serve as compelling repositories of both embodied memory and valuable materials, creating a nuanced landscape deserving of thorough investigation.

By delving into the historical, cultural, and social factors contributing to the abandonment of these buildings, our aim is to unveil the layers of embodied memory they harbour. The vacant buildings narrate past vibrant community life, serving as silent observers to the evolution of rural Danish towns. They provide a unique perspective on the societal changes and shifts in community dynamics that have taken place over time.

In the context of rural-to-urban migration, the abandoned homes left behind in rural areas become poignant symbols of consumption and discard practices. As individuals move towards urban centres, these vacant structures bear witness to a transformative shift in societal values and lifestyles. Once integral to rural communities, these homes encapsulate tangible remnants of past lives and rural livelihoods, underscoring the materiality of the items left behind. The intrinsic value of these materials, be it historical significance, locally sourced construction materials, or potential for adaptive reuse, serves as a lens to comprehend the broader implications of consumption choices.

Going beyond the intangible realm of embodied memory, our paper examines the material potential encapsulated within these vacant buildings. The examination of the potential of these materials is crucial, not only for mitigating environmental impact but also for uncovering hidden value and opportunities for sustainable repurposing.

This paper challenges the conventional perception of vacant buildings as mere liabilities, urging stakeholders to recognize them as untapped assets. By unlocking the hidden value within these structures, we can catalyse sustainable development practices, revitalise rural communities, and initiate a paradigm shift in waste management approaches. Embracing a holistic perspective on waste and value within the context of vacant buildings not only promises tangible benefits for local communities, but also preserves intangible qualities that are indispensable for rural life. In addition, it also aligns with global sustainability goals, making it a compelling avenue for future research and policy considerations.

This study endeavours to conduct an in-depth analysis through the examination of three case studies within the municipality of Thisted; characterised by a decreasing population and high

rates of building vacancy. The research seeks to observe and document instances of vacancy within the rural Danish contexts, in a narrative where the buildings are no longer deemed as waste, but permeated with potential.

# Addressing the Matter of Value in the Circular Economy: The Case of Plastics in India

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**Abstract**
Plastics, as Guy Hawkins and Max Liboiron have pointed out, were made to be wasted (2013, 2016). How and where does one locate value for such objects or things? In the past two decades plastic wastes have captured the world's attention. The global plastic treaty, a binding international agreement to address plastic pollution, is estimated to be finalized this year. Meanwhile, involved stakeholders—international foundations, businesses, politicians, and policymakers—have been propagating a circular economy (CE) framework to address the plastic crisis. Circular economy for plastics (CEP) borrows from models of CE that propose keeping materials in circulation at their highest value—by prolonging use, engaging in reuse, repair, and through activities that entail remanufacture or recycling. Initiatives and schemes like extended producer responsibility (EPR) are considered crucial to the CEP framework. EPR extends the responsibility of addressing the waste, particularly plastic waste, to the producers of that waste. EPR policies and initiatives have been adopted by many countries to address the plastic waste crisis, and India is no exception. The country announced binding EPR targets for industry stakeholders in 2022, mandating plastic recycling and reuse targets. Building on ethnographic research from two sites in India—an industry-initiated conference in Mumbai revolving around the challenges and opportunities posed by the new EPR schemes and a migrant workers' settlement in Telangana where all kinds of recycled plastics were commonly used—this paper highlights the need to account for the varying and often contradictory registers of value that emerge at different junctures as plastics traverse the dialectic of waste and value. It engages with material aspects of plastics and plastic wastes and examines how this materiality intrudes into or colludes with notions of disposability and re-value-ability through recycling. On the one hand, the paper questions how material value gets defined in CE framings and for whom, and on the other, it argues for the need for anthropological theories of value to account for varying registers of value that emerge beyond matters of consumption to bring into purview material life cycles and trajectories.

Keywords: Plastics, Disposability, Waste, Value, Recycled Plastics, Circular Economy, Extended Producer Responsibility, India

## Violent smashing, careful repair

## Waste and value in the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath in Tibet

**Trine Brox**
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**Abstract**
This presentation contributes to the study of waste a discussion about the role of religion in how and why things come to be defined and sorted as waste and their associated fates. I offer the concepts "waste imaginaries" and "waste trajectories," and by emphasising their interrelationship, I highlight the ways in which waste is not solely shaped by material processes but also by socio-political and religious forces that move people to take specific action. I discuss the acts of smashing and repairing as political and moral acts, ways of dealing with problematic things (complete or broken). My example takes us back to mid-twentieth century Lhasa and conceptions of waste at an extraordinary time of economic and symbolic iconoclasm. I show how the violent destruction of Buddhist material culture during this period involved sorting practices through which various actors distinguished between the excessive, worthless, valuable, and so forth. A Tibetan entrepreneur's account of how he repaired Buddhist statues from rescued parts of smashed statues in the 1980s draws our attention to the durable value of broken things when they are considered sacred or efficacious. Whether from the perspective of Communist ideology or Buddhist beliefs, the power of these objects to demand such purposeful action (violent destruction and respectful care) presents a powerful prism on waste as a moral-political process.

# Refusing Modernity: Bhutan's journey from consumption colonialism and disposal dilemmas toward Zero Waste

**Elizabeth Allison**
PhD

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## Abstract

During its rapid two-generation transition from a rural economy based in subsistence agriculture to a coveted tourist destination and global thought-leader on issues of environmental sustainability and alternative economic models, the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan experienced a sudden influx of non-biodegradable manufactured goods that posed a challenge to existing systems for handling household and municipal waste. During the 1990s, India, Bhutan's largest trading partner, liberalized its economy, contributing to an influx of manufactured products that led to disposal dilemmas in Bhutan. In this predominantly Buddhist nation, existing cultural norms were unable to address nonbiodegradable waste, which polluted city streets and the countryside alike, separating humans from the landscape in what Marx called a metabolic rift.

If "pollution is colonialism," as Max Liboiron (2021) has argued, did Bhutan avoid invasive settler colonialism in the age of exploration to fall prey to "consumption colonialism," as consumption patterns shifted away from subsistence, thrift, and re-use to convenience and disposability in the early 21st century? Subsequent to alarms about widespread land and water pollution, Bhutan set the audacious goal of achieving Zero Waste by 2030. In so doing, Bhutan wrested control of its narrative away from the modernist technocratic linear pathway from use to disposal and is seeking to re-embed human society in the closed-loop ecological substrate, repairing the metabolic rift. As such, Bhutan's Zero Waste goal rejects dominant modernist tropes to rethink the ontology and epistemology of waste. This paper traces the cultural context of Bhutan's emergent disposal dilemma, develops the concept of "consumption colonialism," and shows how a Buddhist Rinpoche's nondual teachings offer insight for rethinking approaches to waste.

## Handprints on the Tibetan Plateau: The Making of Zero Waste Communities in the Sanjiangyuan Region, China

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**Abstract**
The subjects of waste and Zero Waste offer an insightful lens through which to examine the complex interplay between Tibetan nomadic communities, their environments, and waste management amidst profound socio-ecological changes in the Sanjiangyuan region of China. This research aims to analyze the effects of consumerism, development, and conservation efforts on the material and cultural dimensions of nomadic existence and resistance, and how these have influenced the relational dynamics between nomads, their environment, and non-humans.

This research applied participant observation and semi-structured conversational methods (Kovach 2020) that integrated Western theories and Tibetan epistemology into the theoretical framing based on the characteristics of mundane and sacred wastes (Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2022). The two Tibetan terms used in the study area, "*gé nyikg"* (swept debris) and "*nyop lü"* (withered fertilizer) closely resonate with the Douglasian concept of "dirt"(Douglas 1966), to be ordered, and the symbiotic concept of "scat"(Reno 2014), as signs of life.

Some findings include individuals and groups seemingly using the idea of "ecological noble Indians"(Nadasdy 2005) to create an image of ecologically noble nomads. In the process, conservation NGOs are deliberately making efforts in translations of documents and WeChat articles to make environmental activities apolitical by omitting political statements and adding whimsical adjectives. On the contrary, the nomads are (de)politicizing their environmental activities by declaring their allegiance to the party and government policies. The two groups carefully manage the power relations within themselves and their own unique social, economic, and political contexts as well.

This research also found the trajectory of how the global discourse of "Zero Waste" has taken place in conversations in rural communities and the narratives of Tibetan and Chinese NGOs in the Sanjiangyuan region. Over time, nomadic activities have evolved from cleaning sacred places clogged with "zombie rubbish" (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2022) to "no garbage", "zero rubbish", and "zero plastic" and ultimately settling for "Zero Waste", at least in the languages of NGOs. However, in nomadic communities, the word "zero" is rarely used. Instead, they use the word "*med*", which means "have not". It is relatively more elastic than the numeric term "zero", which leaves no room for interpretation. Nonetheless, the non-zero-waste families that live in the same village view the practice as rather unreceptive due to a vow that the zero families ostensibly took to go "zero", which they think is not only unachievable but also sinful. In addition, gender roles in different types of labor make what some consider waste, such as plastic covers for drying yak dung, very convenient and labor-saving for women. The power relations of who gets to define "zero" and "*med*" or decide what is and is not waste has emerged. The research tentatively concludes that male-dominated decision-

making processes may have silenced the voices of women and children from expressing their true thoughts on some of their necessities, such as plastic covers, sanitary pads, milk and yogurt containers, toys, and candies.

# *Laji* as Identities, Writing as Ragpicking: Reconceptualizing Waste and Modernity in Twentieth Century China

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## Abstract

In contemporary Chinese cultural products, including literature, art, and film, the representation of waste (often translated into Mandarin as *laji*) is closely intertwined with discourses around modernity. From documentaries showcasing the contrast between China's economic development and the dire living conditions of people in landfills, to science fiction envisioning the "wastization" and "robotization" of certain classes of the population, waste has served as a lens through which the fissures and nuances of Chinese modernity can be detected and reconfigured.

While most studies on waste and modernity have centered on contemporary works, this paper extends existing scholarship into the Republican and Socialist era.[1] In doing so, it attempts to offer new insights into the historical context of China's waste narratives embedded within and simultaneously shaping today's environmental, political, and cultural landscapes. By analyzing diverse sources such as newspaper and periodical articles, personal diaries, and fiction, the paper argues that, similar to contemporary times, the construction of meanings around waste through stories and images was interwoven with the formation of identities in Republican and Socialist China. Whereas public discourses on waste aimed to construct national identities aligned with the state's modernization goals, individual responses to those discourses were often complex and, at times, contradictory. However, different from today, during the 1920s-1960s when nearly everything was linked to nation-building, waste provided alternative spaces where people could engage in activities and imagination deemed as "non-progressive," such as love affairs, gossiping, and daydreaming, without being criticized or censored by the predominant nationalistic narratives. Moreover, by examining how waste served as both a symbol of gender oppression and a vehicle for resistance, this paper suggests that although there existed multiple interpretations of waste, each representing distinct identities and social positions, they were inevitably shaped by the hetero-male-centeredness that underlined the construction of modernity. Finally, by interweaving these historical texts into contemporary everyday discourses on waste, I contend that the indeterminacy and elasticity of the concept of waste continues to make it a site where the intricacy of modernity unfolds.

[1] In North American and European academia, the "Republican Era" often refers to the period from 1912 to 1949, while the "Socialist Era" denotes the period from 1949 to the late 1970s or early 1980s.

## Giving Up Waste Disposal in Europe: Beyond Environmental Concerns

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**Abstract**

My paper aims to examine the role of sacrifice in transforming waste management in the European Union (EU). I follow a general conceptualization of sacrifice as a sphere of social relations and possibilities associated with giving up. Building upon Mayblin and Course (2013), who acknowledge the efficacy of the sacrificial logic beyond ritual and taking into account the dynamic notion of sacrifice (Edwards 2017), I explore the ways in which giving up is mobilized in waste management to prevent a crisis. Although this extension of sacrifice may look controversial at first sight, I will demonstrate that the calls for the transformation of waste management in the EU resonate with the notion of sacrifice. These calls rely on the saliency and efficacy of giving up, the logic of substitution, and concerns about the movement of life.

The EU politics of resource use has encouraged giving up the wasteful life via emphasis on waste prevention. A challenge arises, however, in that frugal life and waste minimization are not entirely compatible with consumer expectations and basic market assumptions. To resolve the trouble, one may deflect attention from the main causes of a potential crisis by substituting consumer culture with technology for waste disposal. Turning disposal at landfills into a scapegoat is supposed to make the world meaningful again and secure continuity. Although the narratives and experiences vary across the EU countries, landfilling is imagined as a major culprit in the story of failed human attempts to wrestle with waste.

To substantiate my claim, I examine the ways of dealing and living with waste that are themselves disposable. I focus on the transformation of waste management in Czechia, where landfills have become a synecdoche of all wastes, and the end of landfilling has become a necessary sacrifice that needs to be done to secure the continuity of society and sustain life. Interestingly, the dominant Czech discourses shift the EU emphasis from ‘reduction’ to ‘end’ of landfilling, contrast with the practices on the ground, and silence the degree of dependence of the new technologies on the old ones. The ongoing transformation of waste management is much more than just a shift from linear to circular imaginaries, technological advancement, and an attempt to reduce wastefulness and creeping bodily and environmental harm embedded in slow violence. It seems to be an essential social mechanism that attempts to restore balance and sustain life via an act of giving up. This understanding of giving up falls on the fertile soil of a long-term cultural tuning to sacrificial logic that persists despite operating in a country often considered one of the least ‘religious’ in the world.