



Plastic China Discussion Guide

Director: Jiu-Liang Wang

Year: 2016

Time: 82 min

You might know this director from:

Beijing Besieged by Waste (2012)

FILM SUMMARY

Do you ever wonder what happens after you toss that water bottle in the recycling bin? What about that plastic bag or any of the thousands of other things you've put in the recycling to be picked up and hauled away? With **PLASTIC CHINA**, director Jiu-Liang Wang reminds us that our waste is another's way of life.

Until the end of 2017, when China announced a ban on importing foreign trash in an effort to stop being the "world's garbage dump," it was the biggest plastic waste importer, receiving ten million tons per year from most of the developed countries around the world. But instead of focusing on the nitty-gritty of global economics, Wang zeroes in on farmer-turned-recycling workshop owner Kun and his ever-expanding family as they struggle to keep the factory financially viable while maintaining the appearance of modern Chinese capitalist success. Yi-Jie is a precocious eleven-year-old girl whose family works and lives in Kun's workshop, but can't afford the tuition to send her to school because her father drinks away the majority of what little money he makes. Regardless of the dire circumstances, Yi-Jie makes the best of it, turning trash and celestial TV into educational opportunities while caring for her siblings amongst the piling meadows of plastic, even as Kun attempts to coax her to abandon them in favor of schooling on his tab.

By remaining tenaciously close to his subjects, Wang paints a dire portrait of rural China. Not only is there little to no support when it comes to the education of its youth or the health of its working class (both Kun and Yi-Jie's father suffer from unknown ailments that go untreated), but what little money there is seems to be allocated for things like buying a new car to keep up the appearance of being financially successful. Deeply troubling in its implication of western societies, **PLASTIC CHINA** should be required viewing for anyone who cares about the future of our planet.

FILM THEMES

The western world has long used China as the “world’s garbage dump,” exporting unimaginable amounts of trash to be sorted, processed, and repurposed as cheap plastic products to be imported once again. With a personal perspective, PLASTIC CHINA unveils the darker aspects of this economic relationship.

WESTERN WASTE, AN EASTERN PROBLEM

It’s hard to shake the unbelievable images of Yi-Jie and her young siblings living, working, playing, and even eating amongst the mountains of piled plastic she calls home at Kun’s recycling workshop. They make capes out of discarded newspapers, use found advertisements as school texts, and construct computers out of cardboard and taped together rubbish. Nearly all of the garbage has been imported from overseas, from throwaway cultures who unconsciously produce enormous amounts of waste with poverty-stricken Chinese families such as Yi-Jie’s suffering the consequences.

HEALTH CONCERNS

There are several moments throughout the film where we see Kun examining strange bumps and possible tumors he’s discovered on his body, most likely as a result of his constant exposure to discarded plastic products. Worse yet, he refuses to see a doctor, as he is deeply worried about what they might tell him. Meanwhile, Yi-Jie’s father suffers from alcoholism and is severely in need of treatment for the benefit of his entire family. In addition, copious fish are spotted floating lifeless in a nearby stream, almost definitely the result of pollution from the plastic that seems to be consuming their entire community.

A LACK OF EDUCATION

At one point in PLASTIC CHINA, Kun reveals his regret of not going to college, gleaning an education, and possibly avoiding a life lived in the waste of others. Knowing this, he urges his own children to pursue an education. We see him helping his kids learn to read and he even goes so far as attempting to coax Yi-Jie to abandon her family to attend school on his dime when she is told by her father that he can’t afford the tuition. To her detriment, she remains loyal to her family’s wishes.

KEEPING UP (CAPITALIST) APPEARANCES

Director Jiu-Liang Wang refers to PLASTIC CHINA as a title which riffs on the idea of plastic surgery—a way of masking the underlying physical truth of any given situation. In the film we witness Kun and his family looking for a new car, despite the fact that their old family van continues to serve them fairly well. Their main intention is to impress their community with how well they are doing financially by purchasing and driving around in a new car, even though they are struggling to make ends meet with their recycling workshop in reality.

“Hiding beneath China’s prosperity is a question that has never before been raised: how can this country develop economically at such an impressive pace? The theme of plastic also evokes that of surgery: China’s present prosperity is therefore only an illusion.”

Jiu-Liang Wang, director

“It’s time to wave goodbye to the ‘out of sight, out of mind’ attitude towards waste.”

Tom Baxter and Liu Hua of Greenpeace,

East Asia

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. How frequently do you consider the waste you produce on a daily basis?
2. What was your initial reaction to the world depicted in PLASTIC CHINA?
3. Do you think there are underlying reasons why Kun, his family, and his employees are in the situation that they are today, sorting garbage for a living?
4. How did you feel about the filmmaker’s choice to keep the focus of the film on the family and its business, rather than the greater global economic issues at hand?
5. While watching the film, what was your greatest personal concern?
6. Several times within PLASTIC CHINA, health concerns are brought to the fore, but never expanded upon. What is your take on this strategy?
7. Since the film was released, China has enacted a ban on the importation of foreign waste. What do you think has happened in the wake of this ban?
8. Kun and his family spend a substantial amount of time in the film thinking about and looking to buy a new car. Knowing their greater financial struggles, why do you think they do this?
9. As depicted, free public schooling appears not to exist in rural China, resulting in bright young children like Yi-Jie who aren’t able to pursue a proper education. What was your reaction to this?
10. PLASTIC CHINA features scenes showing vast fields of seemingly endless trash. What impact does this have on the viewer? Do you think this was an effective visual style?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- PLASTIC CHINA had its world premiere at IDFA 2016 where it won the Special Jury Prize for First Appearance. The film went on to screen at the Sundance Film Festival; the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, where it won the Environmental Award; and DocAviv Film Festival, where it won Best International Film.
- Director Jiu-Liang Wang was born a peasant's son in a village in China's eastern Shandong Province. He sold cellphones and vegetables to save for college, and at age 26 he finally made it to the Communication University of China in Beijing to study photography. In 2008 he moved back home to work on his first-large scale photo project about the environmental devastation of his home province, and in 2012, after three years of filming, he debuted his first feature documentary, BEIJING BESIEGED BY WASTE.
- Since the 1980s, China has been the world's largest importer of waste. By 2012, up to 56 percent of global exported plastic waste ended up in China, according to the [South China Morning Post](#). On January 1, 2018, China enacted a ban on importing 24 kinds of solid waste from overseas because of the damage it creates to the environment and people's health, sending shockwaves throughout the world.
- As reported by [The Guardian](#) via the China Plastics Processing Association, in 2006 the country was home to roughly 60,000 small-scale, family-owned workshops devoted to recycling plastic. Of those, 20,000 are concentrated in roughly 50 rural villages in Wen'an County, the heart of the global scrap plastics trade.
- China's state education system offers nine years of compulsory schooling and admits students to colleges strictly through exam scores. Yet there is a huge gap in educational opportunities for students in rural areas. Approximately 60 million students in rural areas of China are left behind by the system and stand no chance when competing academically with their urban counterparts, reports [The New York Times](#).
- As was witnessed in PLASTIC CHINA, Yi-Jie was not going to school when Wang started to film, because her father said he could not afford the tuition. According to [The New York Times](#), when Yi-Jie turned eleven, the director and the film's producing companies spent their own money to send Yi-Jie back to her hometown in Sichuan to attend school for the first time.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Donate** to [CNEX Foundation Limited](#). This non-profit foundation devoted to the production and promotion of documentaries of the Chinese people has pledged to provide a portion of donations to support Yi-Jie's family.
2. **Know** your local recycling procedures. Procedures vary from area to area, so visit your local municipality's website to find out what you can recycle. If you live in North American, check out [Recycle Nation](#) to locate a recycling location near you.
3. **Raise** community awareness about recycling opportunities. Enlighten your co-workers, neighbors, and elected officials about recycling benefits and help them feel that they could be part of the solution. Greenpeace has produced an eBook titled "[The ABCs of Recycling](#)" as a helpful guide.
4. **Reduce** the plastic waste you produce on a daily basis. When out and about, kindly decline plastic bags, straws, and any other one-time use items that you can live without. The [Green Education Foundation](#) has produced a useful guide to reduce your plastic waste.

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They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.