China: E-waste and environmental colonialism

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The enormity of China's environmental nightmare is well-known. However, its root causes — especially the part played by First World capital — is less widely understood. One example is the massive dumping in China of First World "e-waste" — electronic and electrical waste

Dumping e-waste in the Third World can mean easy profits for First World so-called "recycling" companies and also helps relieve pressure on manufacturers to develop more environmentally friendly products and production processes that might cut into profit margins. Many electronic and electrical products are laden with toxic chemicals and heavy metals harmful to human health and the environment, and their disposal is often governed by strict regulations in First World countries.

One of the worst dumpers of e-waste in the Third World is the US. An article in the July 2005 Environmental Impact Assessment Review revealed that according to representatives of the US recycling industry, around 80% of the e-waste collected by the industry was exported to Asia, of which 90% went to China. A November 2005 report by the US Congress's Government Accountability Office cited a gap between the "enormous quantity of used electronics that are obsolete (or becoming obsolete), and the quantity either in landfills or sent to recycling centers". The GAO noted that this suggests many are still in household storage or have been sent for "recycling and reuse overseas".

According to the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the US generated 2.6 million tonnes of e-waste in 2005, nearly 8% more than in 2004.

An April 13, 2006, Knight Ridder News Service report observed: "Under the guise of 'recycling', the US brokers ship discarded computers and dump an environmental problem on China." The article explained, "The US government does not ban or monitor such exports. What's more, the Environmental Protection Agency has no certification process for electronic-waste recyclers. Any company can claim it recycles waste, even if all it does is export it."

Washington refusess to ratify either the Basel Convention, initiated in 1989, or the 1995 Basel Ban Amendment, which strengthened the convention. The treaty's aim is to minimise the dumping of hazardous waste generated in First World countries, like e-waste, in the Third World.

A 2002 report issued by the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition and the Basel Action Network explained, "Rather than having to face the e-waste problem squarely, the United States has made use of a convenient, and until now, hidden escape valve: exporting the crisis to developing countries in Asia … Informed recycling industry sources estimate that between 50 to 80 percent of the wastes collected for recycling are not recycled domestically at all, but very quickly placed on container ships bound for destinations like China."

The US isn't the only country that's dumping e-waste in China. Xinhua News Agency reported on

January 31 that the 49 containers of incoming hazardous waste weighing more than 8000 tonnes intercepted by Chinese customs in 2006 came from as far flung as the European Union, Japan and South Korea, as well as the US.

A March 5 press release by Hong Kong government's Environmental Protection Department reported that eight containers of Japanese e-waste that sought to sneak through customs had been intercepted. Hong Kong is a key hub through which e-waste flows into China. A March 3 EPD press release revealed that eight containers containing waste computer monitors and television sets had been intercepted and repatriated to Japan.

For every container of e-waste intercepted entering China, it is likely that many more make it through. In 2003, Human Rights in China reported that US e-waste brokers routinely tape $100 bills inside the shipping containers before they go through customs.

Meanwhile, the e-waste that China itself generates is also mounting, especially since Beijing's pro-capitalist shift in the early 1990s. Quoting the China Home Electronics Association, China Daily reported on January 29 that 150 million television sets, washing machines, refrigerators, air-conditioners and computers are discarded every year in China. E-goods suppliers in China aren't interested in managing these e-wastes in a socially responsible way.

Domestic and foreign e-waste has increasingly congregated in a growing number of scrapheaps, mainly along China's coast. Of them, Guiyu in Guangdong province is by far the biggest. The town of 133,000 residents started processing e-waste in 1995.

"In Guiyu, as in similar dumping grounds in India, Pakistan and the Philippines, migrant workers are paid pennies to crack open and sort parts of monitors and circuit boards, exposing themselves to toxic metals like lead, mercury and cadmium", reported a November 23, 2002, San Jose Mercury News article.

The report continued: "They burn PVC cables to extract copper, poisoning the air. They dip circuit boards and chips in acid to recover small amounts of gold, inhaling the fumes and dumping the acid into a nearby river that is dying."

An April 13, 2006, Knight Ridder report explained, "Local bosses pay little regard to workers' health or regulations that prohibit dumping acid baths into rivers and venting toxic fumes".

While an average e-waste processing worker in Guiyu earned merely US$0.30 an hour, the town itself reports revenues of $75 million from processing 1.5 million tonnes of e-waste a year, according to a local government website. Eighty per cent of the waste that Guiyu processes came from overseas.

Early this year, a Chinese government report revealed that 80% of Guiyu's children suffered from lead poisoning. A study conducted by Hong Kong Baptist University since 2003 concluded early this year that the level of polybrominated diphenyl ether (PBDE) flame retardants at an e-waste combustion site in Guiyu was more than 16,000 times higher than at a control site. Environmental Science and Technology Online noted in a December 2001 article, "The toxicology of PBDEs is currently under investigation, but research has established that PBDEs can be persistent, bioaccumulative, and toxic". Linda Birnbaum from the EPA told ESTO that they can cause liver and neurodevelopmental toxicity and affect thyroid hormone levels.

Human Rights in China's 2003 report observes that "China's burgeoning manufacturing industries are very hungry for production feedstocks and some of these materials must come from either mining (raw materials) or from recycling (processed material)".

The report explained: “As a result of this demand, as well as the labor and environmental factors, both the manufacturing of toxic electronic products and the recycling of hazardous e-waste now primarily takes place in developing countries. What this means is that China bears a disproportionate toxic burden for products from which other countries benefit”.

P.S.

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