

The Impact of China's Waste Import Ban on the Waste Mining Economy in East Asia

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Abstract : This proposal offers to shed light on the changing legal geography of the global waste economy. Global waste recycling has become a multi-billion-dollar industry. NASDAQ predicts the emergence of a worldwide 1,296G\$ waste management market between 2017 and 2022. Underlining this evolution, a new generation of preferential waste-trade agreements has emerged in the Pacific. In the last decade, Japan has concluded a series of bilateral treaties with Asian countries, and most recently with China. An agreement between Tokyo and Beijing was formalized on 7 May 2008, which forged an economic partnership on waste transfer and mining. The agreement set up International Recycling Zones, where certified recycling plants in China process industrial waste imported from Japan. Under the joint venture, Chinese companies salvage the embedded value from Japanese industrial discards, reprocess them and send them back to Japanese manufacturers, such as Mitsubishi and Panasonic. This circular economy is designed to convert surplus garbage into surplus value. Ever since the opening of Sino-Japanese eco-parks, millions of tons of plastic and e-waste have been exported from Japan to China every year. Yet, quite unexpectedly, China has recently closed its waste market to imports, jeopardizing Japan's billion-dollar exports to China. China notified the WTO that, by the end of 2017, it would no longer accept imports of plastics and certain metals. Given China's share of Japanese waste exports, a complete closure of China's market would require Japan to find new uses for its recyclable industrial trash generated domestically every year. It remains to be seen how China will effectively implement its ban on waste imports, considering the economic interests at stake. At this stage, what remains to be clarified is whether China's ban on waste imports will negatively affect the recycling trade between Japan and China. What is clear, though, is the rapid transformation in the legal geography of waste mining in East-Asia. For decades, East-Asian waste trade had been tied up in an 'ecologically unequal exchange' between the Japanese core and the Chinese periphery. This global unequal waste distribution could be measured by the Environmental Stringency Index, which revealed that waste regulation was 39% weaker in the Global South than in Japan. This explains why Japan could legally export its hazardous plastic and electronic discards to China. The asymmetric flow of hazardous waste between Japan and China carried the colonial heritage of international law. The legal geography of waste distribution was closely associated to the imperial construction of an ecological trade imbalance between the Japanese source and the Chinese sink. Thus, China's recent decision to ban hazardous waste imports is a sign of a broader ecological shift. As a global economic superpower, China announced to the world it would no longer be the planet's junkyard. The policy change will have profound consequences on the global circulation of waste, re-routing global waste towards countries south of China, such as Vietnam and Malaysia. By the time the Berlin Conference takes place in May 2018, the presentation will be able to assess more accurately the effect of the Chinese ban on the transboundary movement of waste in Asia.

Keywords : Asia, ecological unequal exchange, global waste trade, legal geography

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