

Waste in Contemporary Chinese Art: Byproducts of China's Urban Development and Consumerism

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Introduction: Xu Bing's Phoenix

In 2010, leading contemporary Chinese artist Xu Bing completed a work titled *Phoenix Project*, which consists of two mammoth sculptures, one 100 feet long and the other 90 feet long, in the shape of the Chinese legendary creature phoenix (fig. 01). The two mythical birds are entirely made of construction waste and tools that Xu managed to amass around construction sites (fig. 02). They include shovels, worn hard hats, bamboo scaffoldings, steel rebar and scrap iron, extinguishers, jackhammers, pipes, tire rims, saws, screwdrivers, pliers, plastic accordion tubing, among other countless items that were painstakingly arranged to form the body, feathers, and talons of the creatures. Equipped with all these industrial staffs, the birds take on a heavy and hard appearance. At night (fig. 03), however, the tiny LED lights laced all over their bodies transform them into twinkling and ephemeral presence.

This is a work that directly engages with a major social movement in contemporary China, that is the commercialized urban development. Xu began this work in early 2008 when he was invited to create a sculpture for the atrium of the World Financial Center in Beijing, which was then under construction. Upon visiting the future-to-be World Financial Center, he was shocked by primitive working conditions migrant workers laboring around the construction site, which posed a striking contrast with the ultra-modern life that the building was meant to promote. In response, he decided to construct two large phoenixes by recycling waste and tools right from the very construction site and hiring migrant workers for the project. The building's developers eventually withdrew their financial support of the work, not appreciating the potentially controversial meaning that the birds might convey to the authorities. Xu continued on his own with materials collected and purchased from construction sites across Beijing and had the *Phoenix Project* completed in 2010. The grand scale, the raw appearance, and the process of making the work that very much modeled upon Beijing's urban redevelopment, soon won the *Phoenix Project* the reputation of "an artwork almost too vivid in its resemblance to contemporary China."

The work draws attention to both the workers who built the two phoenixes as well as the demolition of old neighborhoods and the construction of new urban structures such as the World Financial Center that are regarded as more suitable for Beijing's metropolitan image. Demolition and construction, which characterize contemporary Chinese urbanization, is a major source of the skyrocketing production of waste in the country. This, added by waste produced by an increasingly affluent and rapidly growing urban population, made China surpass the U.S. in 2005 to become the world's largest municipal solid waste generator. According to a prediction, Chinese cities will only accelerate annual solid waste production from approximately 190 million

tons in 2004 to over 480 million tons in 2030.¹ With the growing threat to public health and the environment, waste has become an increasingly severe social and economic problem in China. It has also become an unavoidable sight in and outside of Chinese cities and entered into the art of many critical-minded contemporary Chinese artists, such as that of Xu Bing. His *Phoenix Project* exemplifies a rising trend among contemporary Chinese art that has began since the beginning of the 21st century to engage with the troubled social reality brought about by China's GDP-driven and urban-focused consumerist development strategies. This paper introduces different approaches adopted by a number of artists who utilize waste in art making and posits that, collectively, their works constitute a timely cultural critique of the mainstream urbanism.

Aestheticizing waste: Xing Danwen and Han Bing

Xi'an artist Xing Danwen might be one of the first contemporary Chinese artists to turn her attention to the increasing presence of waste in China along with its spectacular economic growth and nationwide urbanization since the early 2000s. Her photographic series *disCONNECTION* (fig. 04), completed in 2002-2003, takes as the subject matter industrial electronic waste, known as "E-trash," that developed countries have dumped in China. Every year, thousands of tons of electronic trash are transported from America, Japan, Korea, and other developed countries to the beaches of southern coastal regions such as Guangdong and Fujian provinces where they are sorted and recycled. According to a recent United Nations report, China is currently the largest e-waste dumping site in the world.² During her field research in Guangdong Province, one of the most developed regions in China, Xing discovered that thousands of local and migrant workers made a hard living by sorting out mounds of computer and electronic trash in primitive and unprotected working conditions. These waste pickers were exposed to various toxic substances as they torn apart electronic waste in order to sort out different parts, and during the process, they also induced serious pollutions to water and soil in the surrounding areas and beyond.

Xing's approach to this distressing reality, which apparently had been going on without much public attention under the shadow of spectacular economic success in this part of China, was aesthetic abstraction. Rather than exposing the abhorred working conditions, she photographed the products of strenuous and long-hour labor: mounds of circuit boards, plastic cords, silicon chips, and other electronic parts. She gave each mound a close-up shot with sharp focus and saturated color. Her aestheticizing of the cold and lifeless scrap turned them into provocative and enticing images. Their semi-abstract and aesthetically intriguing appearance simultaneously draw audiences in and surprise them once they realize what is being photographed. In a twisted way, these images constitute a distinctive portrait of a downside of China's rapid development that, in Xing's words, "conveys the immensity of the problem as well as the unbearable details I witnessed in these e-wastelands." Titled *disCONNECTION*, the work indicates vast socio-cultural disconnection between different social groups such as producers of electronic goods, consumers of them, and the trash pickers who also deal with them, in an increasingly atomized contemporary society. The aestheticization and abstraction of otherwise formidable reality

¹ Dan Hoornweg, Philip Lam, and Manish Chaudhry, *Waste management in China: issues and recommendations* (Washington,

² Daniel Powell, *Assessing and Improving China's E-waste Problem*, April 8, 2013. <http://ourworld.unu.edu/en/assessing-and-improving-the-e-waste-problem-in-china>.

becomes Xing's unique way of revealing a dark side of globalization and exposing the ugly truth behind China's rapid development.

Jiangsu-born multimedia artist Han Bing also uses waste as his object of aesthetic contemplation while exposing a serious problem related with Chinese urbanization. He was drawn to the appallingly visible contamination of above-ground water throughout China as a result of the mindless and irresponsible discard of everyday trash and began his multiple-year photographic series *Urban Amber* in 2005. *Urban Amber-Red Flags Flying on Skylines Cranes* (2006) (fig. 05), taken in Beijing, presents a bluish green body of water where one sees water lilies and fallen leaf-like objects floating above a forest of construction cranes with red flags flying over, an ubiquitous sight in China's accelerated urban expansion. At first glance, the image looks exquisite, giving the illusion of an attractive water surface with fallen leaves and swimming fish in the water. Looking closely, however, one would realize that it is all kinds of waste such as garbage bags, plastic bottles, and human sewage that make up the water surface. The bluish-green color itself is the result of the water being heavily polluted by putrid rubbish and masses of algae. In other pieces (fig. 06) we see reflections of various man-made structures, such as glamorous skyscrapers and new residential complexes for the rich, shanty dwellings for the urban poor, migrants, and peasants, and commercial establishments and advertising billboards, all indistinguishably shrouded under a body of water infested with filthy rubbish.

The work explicitly addresses the issue of water pollution in relation to urban development and makes subject matter the industrial-waste and rubbish-ridden rivers. In this conceptual work, Han took photos of many heavily polluted bodies of water in Beijing and produced single-exposure images without any modification other than simply turning them upside down. However, it is with such a witty and perceptive reversal that the industrial waste and rubbish conveniently thrown away by people into rivers, canals, or ponds have returned, taking up the position of the sky in Han's landscape photos. Beijing is but one of the many cities that have become laden with water pollution, a nationwide problem accompanying China's environmentally destructive advancement into an economic superpower and an ultra-urban nation. In this series, Han brings to the forefront the paradoxical result of modernization and reveals one prominent downside of Chinese urbanization. Chinese cities have built higher and higher structures to house the dreams of urbanites, as these construction cranes are still doing in Han Bing's photo. Simultaneously, the modernized urban lifestyle that centers on material consumption and convenient living has produced ever dirtier and stinkier rivers, ponds, and lakes. Han's documentary photographs of the garbage-infested rivers function like amber, as well put by Maya Kovskyaya, "capturing the sediment of an age, and reflecting the dark side of dreams of modernization."³

Documenting waste: Liu Xintao and Wang Jiuliang

While some contemporary Chinese artist imbed their social critique by taking an aestheticizing approach and presenting the unexpected beauty of waste in their images, others directly depict the ugliness of waste and the source of its rapid accumulation.

Liu Xintao

Sichuan painter Liu Xintao (b. 1968) captures the invasion of trash in urban public space, specifically the street, in his *Collapsing Night*, a series of oil paintings that he has concentrated

³ Kovskaya, "China Under Construction: Chinese Contemporary Art of the Everyday Comes of Age," 9.

on since 2005. In *Collapsing Night-Wild Lily* that Liu completed in 2007 (fig. 07), the canvas confronts the viewer with cluttered trash conspicuously taking up the foreground near a street manhole. Drippings of gray paint are running down from the trash through the unpainted canvas towards the bottom frame, adding to the messy and dirty feeling associated with garbage. Amid the scattered trash of identifiable and unrecognizable objects, some white lilies emerge with blossoming flowers. They, however, are rotting like other trash surrounding them, with white dripping falling from the petals. Right above and behind the rotten flowers there are the upper bodies of a hugging couple, one of which is topless while the other's condition is ambiguous. Their situation looks like they have just been abruptly transferred into this awful environment that they have yet to realize. The love between humans is exposed in the littered street and acquires an incongruous nature.

Behind these disconcerted foreground and middle ground scenes that dominate most of the canvas, is a normal street view of a city with a wide paved road receding dramatically into the distance, submerging in a well-lit area at the end. Rendered in a dramatic foreshortening fashion, the two sides of the street are defined by well-trimmed trees of similar height that are decorated with shining holiday lights, behind which are the profiles of a few low-rise and high-rise architectural blocks looming against the foreboding darkness of the night sky. This rational and well-ordered section of the cityscape, pushed into a thin slice on top of the canvas, is in noticeable contrast with the irrational presence of the trash and the hugging pair. Liu describes his experience of absurdity in real life that inspired this painting series:

I took a walk at the early evening and what I saw were wild dogs barking, rats scurrying, and stinking garbage piling up here and there. Behind such a messy environment the profile of a thriving city suddenly appeared in distance with its shining and intoxicating neon lights. It was an extremely absurd and even horrific scene.⁴

The downright absurdity and contrast that characterize his composition are thus a realistic representation of the uneven processes of Chinese urbanization that allow some cities to grow into shining global metropolises while others are made to pay the price in economic and environmental terms (fig. 08). Moreover, the dominance of the trash in the composition hints upon the wasteful lifestyle promoted in an increasingly consumption-oriented urban culture. A rising urban middle class who benefit from China's economic reforms are accustomed to a lifestyle that over-consumes, both in food and in things, and throws away leftovers and the unwanted without care. The unsightly appearance of trash in the middle of the street also points to the way contemporary Chinese urbanites treat or abuse the public space. Since the 1990s, as art historian Wu Hung comments, there is a strong contrast between the care Chinese urbanites attend to their private space and their total disregard to what they consider public space.⁵ This contrast, I argue, reflects a general decline of social conscience and sense of responsibility among the Chinese population. The source of this problem, one may argue, is the coming dominance of self-interested materialism and consumption-driven culture, which lacks the effect of moral restraints as the traditional Confucian ethos or Communist ideology used to have on Chinese citizens. Essentially, it is a reflection of the lack of civic consciousness towards and

⁴ Liu Xintao, "Kuiye—ziwo de xiaojie yu chonggou" (Collapsing night—self-decomposition and reconstruction), in *Liudong yishu 3—juxiang yanjiu: tuxiang xiaofei* (Mobile art 3—figurative art research: image and consumption), ed. Peng Feng (Nanchang: Jiangxi Fine Arts Press, 2010), 135.

⁵ Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 1999), 23.

active participation in the public space, ideas that certainly are not being encouraged by the authoritarian approach that undergirds Chinese urban transformation.

Wang Jiuliang

The problem of trash reflected in Liu Xintao's pictorial art is also what has motivated Shandong artist Wang Jiuliang (b. 1976) to initiate his sociological survey since 2008 to locate and document landfills used for urban trash from Beijing. He has taken hundreds of photographs (fig. 09) of often disheartening visual content with both natural environment and human beings negatively impacted by the rapid increase of urban waste production. His work calls attention to the striking increase of waste generated by cities, a direct byproduct of the country's continuous and reckless urbanization and its promotion of consumption-oriented urban lifestyle. Dominated by the ideology of consumerism, accompanied by rapid urban expansion and increasing affluence, Chinese cities have generated ever more waste in various forms such as everyday garbage and trash, electronic and industrial rubbish, or construction and demolition debris.

In 2011, Wang released his first documentary, entitled *Beijing Besieged by Waste*, which combines photographs and video footages of his travels to many large landfill sites in the outskirts of Beijing and his observational visits of and interaction with scavengers, mostly migrant workers from the countryside, who live by and on the dumps (fig. 10).⁶ He traveled to more than 500 landfills surrounding Beijing in his effort to map out the specific locations of landfills, and this documentary is a striking summary of his discoveries in the hitherto not seen or known dirty backyards of Beijing.⁷ The 72-minute video narrates Beijing's distressing cycle of consumption, the ill-managed and sometimes illegal operation of waste after being collected from the urban districts, the appalling destruction to the environment including rivers, soil, and air, the horrific lives lived by scavengers and their children, and government negligence or implicit collaboration.

Wang sees the proliferation of landfills as a mirror reflecting the mindless urban expansion of Beijing.⁸ His film shows that in order to meet the insatiable demand for construction materials as thousands of new buildings are added to the city's urban landscape, workers dig deep into mountains and rivers to excavate stones and sand. Then the numerous pits left behind are used as ready made landfills where tons of urban waste are poured in to fill them up. Many of these operations, of course, have been done illegally but nonetheless continuously. On the other side of this rapid growing city, however, is the bleak and liminal existence of thousands of scavengers, who live and try to thrive at the lowest level of Chinese society by sorting and recycling waste. Wang's film takes us close to the everyday life and mentality of these people who lived in shabby shelters nearby or right onto the landfill sites. They built their homes from recycled materials and found clothes and sometimes food from waste dumps. Their children found toys that they parents would not be able to afford.

Overall, Wang's photographs and the documentary, in their straightforward and minimalist style, expose the stark truth of a city overshadowed by waste, a not often reported or discussed dark

⁶ Wang Jiuliang, director. *Beijing Besieged by Waste* (La Ji Wei Cheng), 2011, documentary, 72 minutes, Mandarin with English subtitles. dGenerate Films/Icarus Films.

⁷ Wang, Jiuliang, "Artist Statement: Beijing Besieged by Garbage," Inaugural Issue of Cross-Currents E-Journal, no. 1 (2011), <https://cross-currents.berkeley.edu/e-journal/photo-essay/beijing-besieged-garbage/statement>

⁸ http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2011-05/06/content_12459857.htm

reality. For him, this deeply troubled reality exists side by side along with the rapid transformation of Beijing into a world-class city populated by glistening skyscrapers and embellished with iconic architectural projects from internationally famed architects. As his research reveals, the continuous urban expansion, the growing materialism and consumerism, and the negligence from both the municipal government and urban residents seem to have pushed Beijing, China's capital city, to the edge of self-suffocation with the hundreds of landfills forming a thick belt encircling the city proper (fig. 11).

Conclusion:

Interconnectedness between art and the urban living environment has constituted a defining characteristic of the development of contemporary Chinese art since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Many artists have turned their attention to social and environmental changes brought about by China's market driven urbanization and in their art making they critically examine various byproducts of this major social movement. The presence of waste in art speaks to the omnipresence of waste in contemporary urban society. Accompanying opportunities and prosperities brought about by China's spectacular economic development and nationwide urbanization in the past two decades is the astonishing accumulation of waste. Many artists are keenly aware of this problem and in their art they examine waste and its various forms and conditions. Although taking different approaches towards different kinds of waste with its different forms and conditions, they have developed new concepts, methodologies, and aesthetics surrounding waste and in so doing, they help to raise awareness of an increasingly severe problem of both social and environmental dimensions.

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- **Introduction: Xu Bing's Phoenix Project**

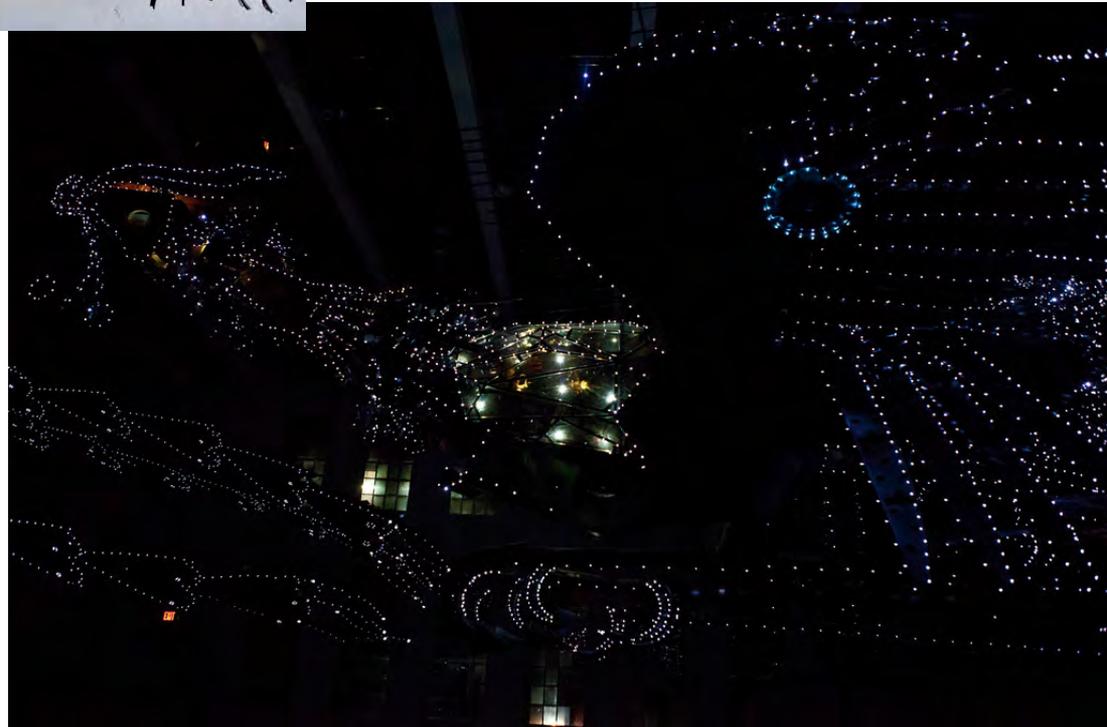
01. Xu Bing: Phoenix, Massachusetts Museum Of Contemporary Art, December 2012-October 2013



02.



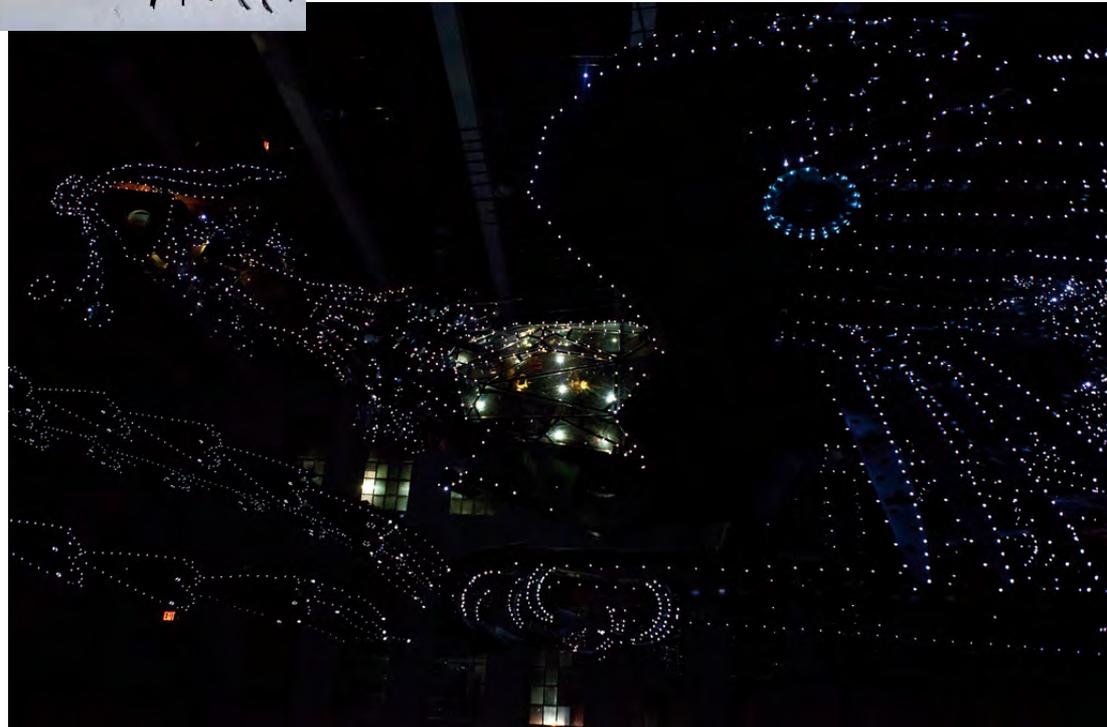
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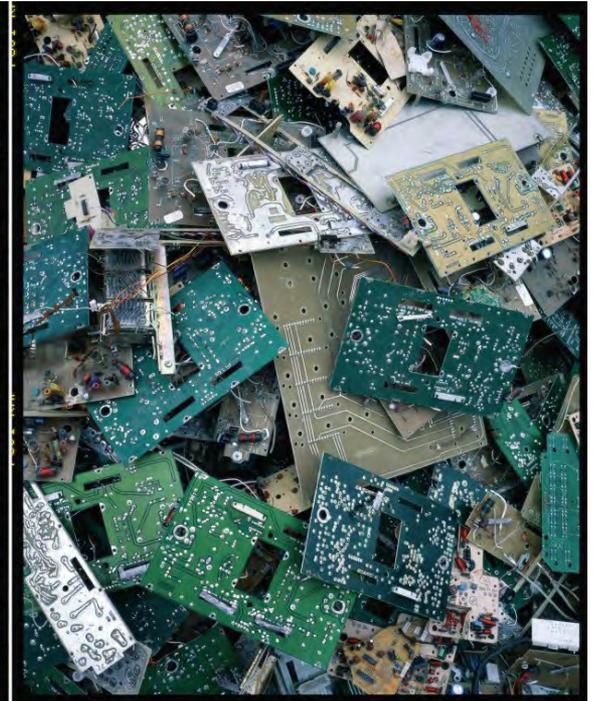


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04. Xing Danwen, disCONNECTION, photograph, 2002-2003



05. Han Bing, *Urban Amber-Red Flags Flying on Skylines Cranes*, 2005, photography.



06. Han Bing, selective pieces from *Urban Amber*,
2005-2011, photography.



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07. Liu Xintao, *Collapsing Night-Wild Lily*, 2007, oil on canvas



08. Liu Xintao, selective pieces from *Collapsed Night*, 2008-2013, Oil on canvas



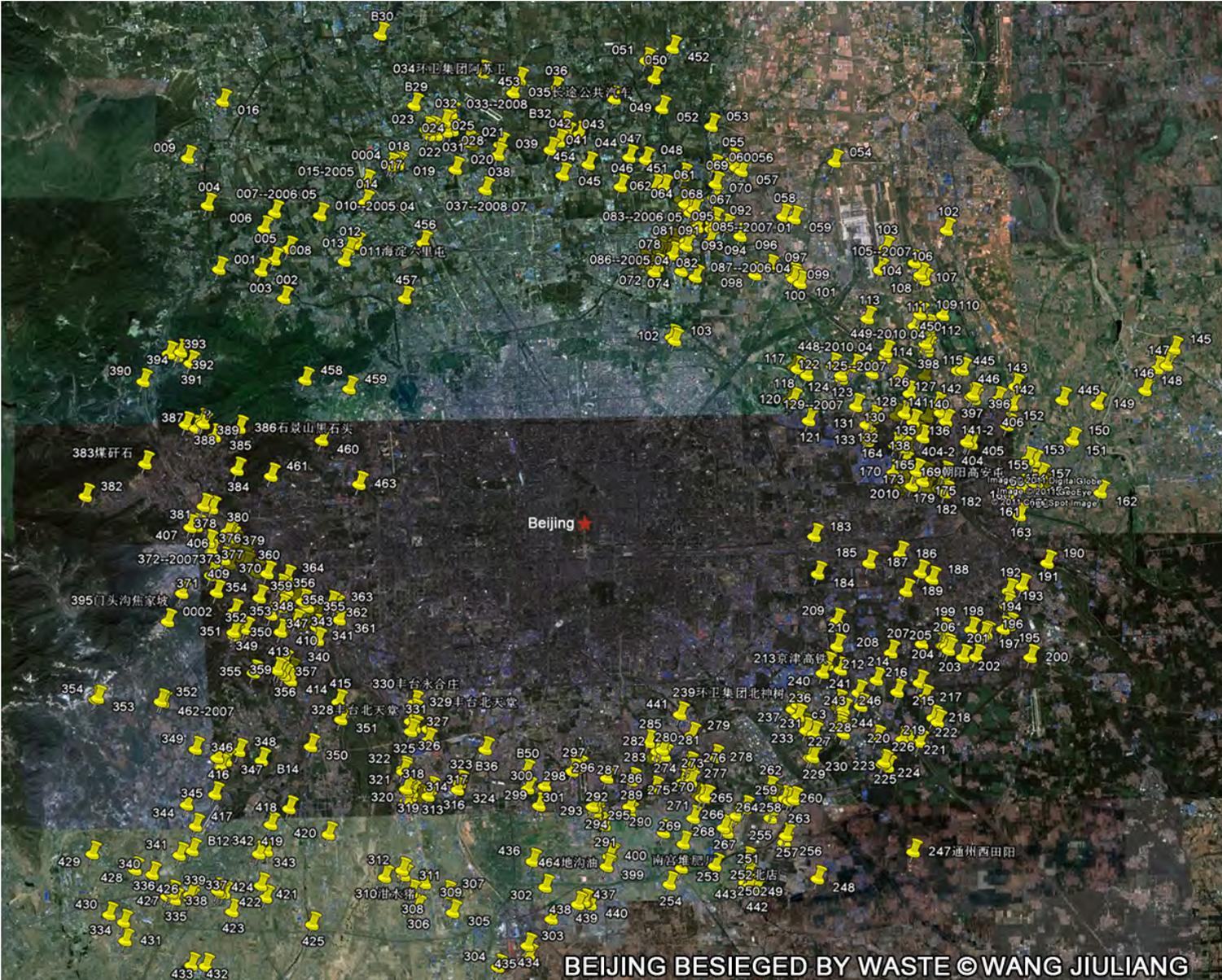
09. Wang Jiuliang



Fig. 10. Wang Jiuliang, stills from *Beijing Besieged by Waste*, video, 72-minutes



Fig. 11. Wang Jiuliang's map of landfills surrounding Beijing



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Thank you!