

# Deconstructing the Institutional Challenges and Environmental Politics of the International Trash Trade

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# Essential Questions

- Why is garbage an important commodity in the global political economy?
- To what extent should international organizations intervene in the market of trash and waste trade?
- How has the World Trade Organization's involvement in the international trash trade affected the global environmental governance throughout the past decade?





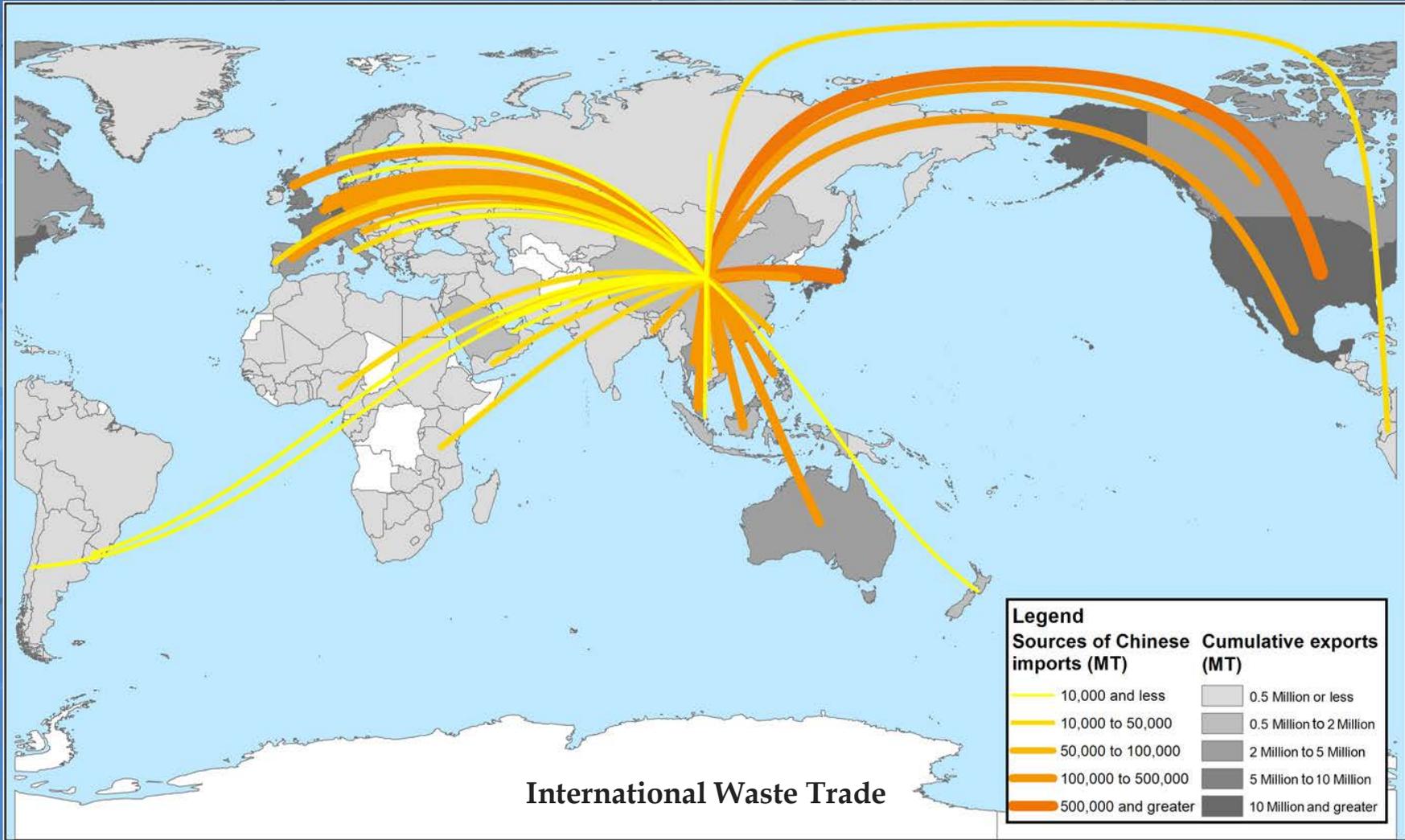
**Garbage**



# Garbage is a commodity.



- Holds market prices for disposal options (recycling, landfilling, or incineration)
- Establishes a profitable industry which discards, transforms, and manages trash through waste shipment to other countries or domestic development of incinerators/landfills
- The import and export of garbage generate financial profits and create opportunities for economic growth.





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*The measurements of the costs of health impairing pollution depends on the foregone earnings from increased morbidity and mortality. From this point of view a given amount of health impairing pollution should be done in the country with the lowest cost, which will be the country with the lowest wages. I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that.”*

*— Lawrence Summers, “Let Them Eat Pollution,”  
World Bank memo, February 8, 1992*



# Causes of China's Waste Import Ban

- In 2001: opened up its domestic markets for plastic waste imports from overseas
- → The Global North offered to pay China for taking and disposing of their recyclable and hazardous trash at a low price.
- Western manipulation of the international trade flows of garbage through waste exportation
  - Egregious cases of waste dumping outside of the agreed terms
  - Escalated severe environmental issues regarding its increasing burden of waste toxicity such as the pollution of land, water, and air in China

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Committee on Technical Barriers to Trade

Original: English

#### NOTIFICATION

The following notification is being circulated in accordance with Article 10.6

1.	<p><b>Notifying Member:</b> CHINA</p> <p><b>If applicable, name of local government involved (Article 3.2 and 7.2):</b></p>
2.	<p><b>Agency responsible:</b> Ministry of Environmental Protection of the People's Republic of China</p> <p><b>Name and address (including telephone and fax numbers, email and website addresses, if available) of agency or authority designated to handle comments regarding the notification shall be indicated if different from above:</b></p>
3.	<p><b>Notified under Article 2.9.2 [ ], 2.10.1 [X], 5.6.2 [ ], 5.7.1 [ ], other:</b></p>
4.	<p><b>Products covered (HS or CCCN where applicable, otherwise national tariff heading. ICS numbers may be provided in addition, where applicable):</b> HS: Plastic waste from living sources: 3915100000; 3915200000; 3915300000; 3915901000; 3915909000; Vanadium slag: 2619000021; 2619000029; 2620999011; 2620999019; Unsorted waste paper: 4707900090; Waste textile materials: 5103109090; 5103209090; 5103300090; 5104009090; 5202100000; 5202910000; 5202990000; 5505100000; 5505200000; 6310100010; 6310900010.</p> <p>Slag, dross (other than granulated slag), scalings and other waste from the manufacture of iron or steel. (HS 2619), Ash and residues (other than from the manufacture of iron or steel), containing arsenic, metals or their compounds. (HS 2620), Waste, parings and scrap, of plastics. (HS 3915), Waste of wool or of fine or coarse animal hair, including yarn waste but excluding garnetted stock. (HS 5103), Garnetted stock of wool or of fine or coarse animal hair. (HS 5104), Cotton waste (including yarn waste and garnetted stock). (HS 5202), Waste (including noils, yarn waste and garnetted stock) of man-made fibres. (HS 5505), Used or new rags, scrap twine, cordage, rope and cables and worn out articles of twine, cordage, rope or cables, of textile materials. (HS 6310), - Other, including unsorted waste and scrap (HS 470790).</p>
5.	<p><b>Title, number of pages and language(s) of the notified document:</b> Catalogue of Solid Wastes Forbidden to Import into China by the End of 2017 (4 classes, 24 kinds) (2 page(s), in Chinese)</p>
6.	<p><b>Description of content:</b> By the end of 2017, China will forbid the import of 4 classes, 24 kinds of solid wastes, including plastics waste from living sources, vanadium slag, unsorted waste paper and waste textile materials.</p>

# World Trade Organization

- A vital international political system under which member governments negotiate, enforce, and revise rules to govern their trade treaties
- Facilitates the globalization of commerce and implements a series of multilateral agreements that have set a universal standard for the coordination of trade policies of most countries of the world
- WTO's expanding role in the facilitation of waste trade emphasizes the interdependence between national economies and draws overdue attention to the eco-centric factor in comparative trade advantages.





# The World Trade Organization's Response

- Import Licensing Committee calls for multilateral cooperation to manage the remaining stockpiles of hazardous and unwanted trash in developed nations.
  - The committee process requires a high level of compliance from its member countries to assess and accept China's notification of measures to their trading counterparts, which is difficult to achieve.
- The WTO's provision of a platform to "trash talk" about trade regulations regarding the import and export of garbage pressures the Global North to prioritize the financial and environmental needs of the Global South.
  - Garbage as a proxy or tool to talk about larger concerns regarding the sustainability of garbage treatment, recycling, and management

# Significance



*The World Trade Organization enhances international cooperation to manage and control the import and export of garbage between countries and pressures the Global North to acknowledge the financial burdens and environmental needs of the countries in the Global South. Such involvement encourages the global effort to reduce waste toxicity and improve global environmental health.*

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