

Geography Speaker Series



Circular Ecologies: Environmentalism and Waste Politics in Urban China



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After four decades of reform and development, China is confronting a domestic waste crisis. Starting in the early 2000s, Chinese policymakers came to see waste management as an object of environmental governance central to the creation of “modern” cities. China’s cities started experiments with the circular economy, in which technology and new policy could convert all forms of waste back into resources. Based on long-term research in Guangzhou, this talk details the implementation of technologies and infrastructures to modernize a mega-city’s waste management system, and the grassroots ecological politics that emerged. In Guangzhou, waste’s transformation revealed uncomfortable truths about China’s mode of environmental governance: a preference for technology over labor, the aestheticization of order, and the expropriation of value in service of an ecological vision. Waste provoked an unlikely political coalition of urban communities, from the middle class to migrant workers, that came to constitute a nascent, bottom-up environmental politics, and offers a model for conceptualizing ecological action under authoritarianism.

Amy Zhang is a sociocultural anthropologist and political ecologist whose research investigates the intersection of environment, technology, labor and urban life. Her first book *Circular Ecologies: Environmentalism and Waste Politics in Urban China* (Stanford University Press, 2024) explores how waste infrastructures, materials and their technical interventions ground and condition the forms, possibilities and limits of China’s emerging urban environmental politics. Other writings have been published in *Cultural Anthropology*, *Current Anthropology*, *Science, Technology and Human Values*, *China Perspectives*, *e-flux Architecture*, *LIMN*, *Made in China* and edited volumes such as *Can Science and Technology save China?*, *Handbook of Political Ecology*, among others. She is assistant professor of Anthropology at New York University.