Short Synopsis

Yi-Jie, an 11-year-old girl, works alongside her parents in a recycling facility while dreaming of attending school. Kun, the facility’s ambitious foreman, dreams of a better life. Through the eyes and hands of those who handle its refuse, an examination of global consumption and culture.

Synopsis

This film tells a story about an unschooled 11-year-old girl Yi-Jie, she’s a truly global child who learns the world through the United Nations of Wastes while working with her YI minority parents in this recycle workshop thousand miles away from their mountain village home town. Going to school is all she longing for. And the ambitious boss of the workshop Kun, who works so hard for trying to give his family a better life.

Through the story of these two families, the film explores how these wastes recycled by the bare hands of families, and discovers their dilemma and choices of suffering irreversible damages on life just to make a living. It also observes that the world is flat and issues don’t go away by changing time and location - we’re all in this together.

Storyline

Newspaper on Prince William’s grand wedding is the magic cape for the kids; eye patches from the Qantas Airways is the protection mask for the workers; a Dutch SIM card brings in a message of “Welcome to China” once inserted to a cellphone.

Welcome to the land of Plastic China. As the world’s biggest plastic waste importer, China receives ten million tons per year from most of the developed countries around the world. With high external costs on local environment and health, the imports are reborn here into “recycled” raw materials for the appetite of China the world factory, and they are exported back to where they came from with a new face such as manufactured clothing or toys.

Our main character Yi-Jie is an unschooled 11-year-old girl whose family works and lives in a typical plastic waste household-recycling workshop. As much as her life is poor and distorted, she’s a truly global child who learns the outside world from the United Nations of plastic wastes, and lives her happiness and sorrows with them. For example, small packs of instant black powder tells her the bitter taste of “coffee”; the English children’s learning cards teach her words like “summer” and “father’s day”; Barbie dolls are her best friends to talk to.

Father has promised to send her to school five years ago but never delivered it. Instead, he spends his hard-earned money on alcohol. However, Yi-Jie keeps her wish of going to school one day, and we saw her holding her playful campaign towards learning and schooling. Will she succeed to sit in a classroom and learn? Or will she succeed her parents as an illiterate laborer in the recycling workshop?

Kun, the owner of this household-recycling workshop, who represents money, power and the educated for Yi-Jie. He looks down on Yij-Je’s family, but also depends on them doing dirty labor works nobody else wants. Once in a while, he teaches Yi-Jie to read and write when in a good mood.

Kun works day and night, and ignores the physical and mental health problems of his own family, just to save for a sedan car like any other factory boss in the region. He’s afraid of being looked down upon and owning a sedan is a status symbol of being successful.

Following the characters, the film explores how the plastic wastes being recycled by the bare hands of workers, and their dilemma and choices of taking irreversible damages – pollution, disease, and death – just to make a living. It also unveils the true face of China: prosperity may appear just like a plastic surgery – fake and fragile with uncertain consequences; people lose control over their mind and fate and being formed into whichever shape as reality requires, just like those plastic products coming out of the mode machine.

Tracing further to the plastic waste imported from everywhere, it signals and symbolizes the lives on the other side of the world. When these symbolic wastes immersed deeply in our characters’ world, we sadly confirm that the world is flat and issues don’t go away by changing time and location: we are all in this together.

Creative Personnel

Director: JIU-LIANG WANG

Director of award-winning and impactful documentary film BEIJING BESIEGED BY WASTE. WANG graduated from Communication University of China, School of Cinematic Arts in 2007. From 2007 to 2008, he finished a set of photography work about Chinese traditional superstitions. He started investigating the landfill pollution around Beijing in 2008. In 2011, he finished BEIJING BESIEGED BY WASTE, a set of photography work and a documentary with the same name. From 2012 to now, he has been working on the documentary PLASTIC CHINA.

Producer: RUBY CHEN

RUBY CHEN is the Co-Founder and CEO of the non-profit CNEX Foundation Limited, the CEO of CNEX Studio. She had been working in McKinsey & Company since 1992, and left as the Director of Leadership Institute in China prior to joining Peking University in its Business School (GSM) as the Executive Director for Executive Education in 2009. With her passion to explore talent, support and promote Chinese documentary films internationally, she is the executive producer for almost 80 documentaries, including the award-winning 1428, KJ: music and Mothers, Look Love, A Young Patriot, etc.

Supervising Editor: JEAN TSIEN

Jean Tsien is an editor, producer, and consultant whose works in non-fiction films span over 30 years. Her editing debut, Something Within Me, won three Awards at the 1993 Sundance Film Festival. Tsien’s notable editing credits include: the 2001 Academy Award, Best Documentary Feature nominee, Scottsboro: An American Tragedy; three Peabody Award-winning films: MALCOLM X: Make It Plain, Travis and Solar Mamas; Please Vote For Me, a 2008 Grierson award recipient for most entertaining documentary; Dixie Chicks: Shut Up and Sing and Miss Sharon Jones! both directed by two-time Academy Award winning director Barbara Kopple; A Place At The Table – which was presented in a special screening at the White House.

Director’s Statement

China imports millions of tons of plastic wastes from all around the world annually. These wastes are processed in rural villages along China’s coastline and then transformed into cheaper plastic recycled raw materials for further use, mainly to manufacturing lower cost goods. Developed countries recycle plastic wastes and then ship the problems away for both economic and environmental cost reasons. China among other developing countries receive these wastes for almost free, and then turn trash into cash – wherever there’s a demand, there’s a market.

According to statistics, there are 25 Chinese counties where the plastic processing industrial bases are located, including some of those considered rich provinces/cities such as Hebei Wen’an, Zhejiang Yuyao, Guangdong Shunde, Jiangshu Xinghua, Shandong Laizhou and so on. There exist many small workshops as the one depicted in our film. For the safety of the protagonists, we won’t disclose where our filming was done. Most of these small workshops are illegal without proper equipment and recycled processes regulators required, hence water and air are polluted, workers are ill from unprotected working environment. Local government lack strong motivation to address the problem perhaps for economic reasons or due to resource constrains.

From March 2013, Chinese government has started an eight-month initiative “Green Fence Operation” to stop importing plastic wastes. However, this operation went away quietly as rumors say that this operation is deemed to fail, because the profits from the plastic imports are huge that a harsh stop brings higher unemployment and social instability.

In March 2011, I carried out a detailed research on disposal of garbage from Europe and US in China. During the research, I’m skeptical about the prosperous landscape of China under the long-term economic growth mode of “pollution for development”, as the “prosperity” is accompanied with huge environmental crisis and reconciled social contradictions among different stratums. I went to a small town in northern China which has more than 30 years’ history of plastic waste processing as its core industry and involves almost all people in this town. Although the local economy seem booming by the processing industry, the environment of the town was seriously polluted. There is no clean water, no fresh air and no safe food. A lot of people who lives there are suffering a variety of deadly diseases.

With a lot of doubts in my mind, I wanted to learn more about the people who live there. I wanted to know what kind of life styles they have and what kind of value judgment they have. I expected to find the answers by making this documentary film. I believe that even the most common life can reveal the gene of the society. I hope the audience can understand the properties of ‘plastic’ that are commonly found across different aspects of China, and also hope the audience can be aware this attribute to the joint action of current Chinese system and global consumerism system.

As the largest manufacturer and exporter of cheaper goods, China is hungry for raw materials and it sets a relatively low bar for environmental protection standards, If taking environmental costs of recycling into account, the recycling costs would be the same in China as in Japan or US, and these waste would not be imported to China. I don't think it’s a result of globalized fair trade of goods and materials. So it’s called Plastic China. The surface looks prosperous, but the interior has many problems. One can have a lot of facelifts and look fabulous, but what does it look like under the shining surface?