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## China Serves As Dump Site For Computers

### Unsafe Recycling Practice Grows Despite Import Ban

By Peter S. Goodman

Washington Post Foreign Service

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GUIYU, China -- This is the end of the road for the toxic detritus of the computer age.

In towns such as this one on China's southeastern coast, vast quantities of obsolete electronics shipped in from the United States, Europe and Japan are piled in mountains of waste. Even as entire communities, including children, earn their livelihoods by scavenging metals, glass and plastic from the dumps, the technological garbage is poisoning the water and soil and raising serious health concerns.

China's role as dumping ground for the world's unwanted gadgets is an outgrowth of efforts by wealthy countries to protect their own environments. Many governments are encouraging the recycling of computers to keep them out of landfills and prevent heavy metals from seeping into drinking water. But breaking computers down into reusable raw materials is labor intensive and expensive.

In the United States, where more than 40 million computers became obsolete in 2001 alone, according to a National Safety Council report, as much as 80 percent of the machines collected by recyclers are being disposed of for about one-tenth of the price through a far simpler means: They are being sold to Asian middlemen, put on ships and sent here.

Officially, China has its own ban on such

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Zhou, 24, came to Guiyu from Guizhou for breaking apart old computers sent to China from wealthy countries. While China bans such imports, the law is easily circumvented. (Peter S. Goodman - The Washington Post)

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imports, but the law is easily circumvented through payments to corrupt customs officials, according to industry sources.

The real costs are being borne by the people on the receiving end of the "e-waste." In towns along China's coast as well as in India and Pakistan, adults and children work for about \$1.20 a day in unregulated and unsafe conditions. As rivers and soils absorb a mounting influx of carcinogens and other toxins, people are suffering high incidences of birth defects, infant mortality, tuberculosis and blood diseases, as well as particularly severe respiratory problems, according to recent reports by the state-controlled Guangdong Radio and the Beijing Youth newspaper

"At the same time that we're preventing pollution in the United States, we're shifting the problem to somebody else," said Ted Smith of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition environmental advocacy group. "It's being exported and doing harm."

### High Toll on Humans, Environment

On a recent morning in Guiyu, in Guangdong province, hundreds of men squatted block sheds, sifting through computers and printers and breaking them into scrap with bare hands. Some inhaled black clouds of toner. A tractor carted a mass of wires to a place where women melted them in barrels to scavenge their copper before spilling the liquid into the dead-black Lianjiang River.

In a low building tucked at the bottom of a hill, a middle-aged woman leaned over a steel plate placed atop a charcoal fire, melting down capacitors pried from computers to recover amounts of gold. Ten feet away, a girl no older than 11 bent over a table, sorting through the circuitry.

"Today there's no school," said the boss, Zheng Conggong, 27, when asked why they were there. "Vacation." It was 10 o'clock on a Monday morning, a regular school day everywhere else in China. When the boss stepped away, the girl timidly confirmed that she worked there every day, all day. Her fingers were quick and nimble, clearly well-practiced.

Nearly every crevice of the town showed evidence of the trade, from the strips of plastic and shards of glass choking the river to the piles of motherboards, hard drives and keyboard front of nearly every home. The landscape was poisonous. Glass from monitors contains lead, which afflicts the nervous system and harms children's brains. Batteries and switches contain mercury, which damages organs and fetuses. Motherboards contain beryllium, the exposure to which can cause cancer.





Trucks bring in drinking water from more than 10 miles away because the local supply is not potable. Near a riverbank that has been used to break down and burn circuit boards, a water sample revealed levels of lead 190 times as high as the drinking water standard set

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World Health Organization, according to a report released last year by the Silicon Toxics Coalition and another U.S.-based environmental group, the Basel Action Network.

The environmental groups had their samples analyzed by the Hong Kong Standard Testing Centre Ltd., according to their report. A sediment sample found levels of 10 other heavy metals such as chromium and barium hundreds of times as high as U.S. European environmental standards for risk. The water test confirmed an earlier sample by a reporter for a Chinese-language publication in Hong Kong, Eastweek Magazine, found even higher lead levels.

The report by the two environmental groups, "Exporting Harm: The High-Tech Trade in Asia," accused computer manufacturers of failing to assume responsibility for the pollution they cause by instituting their own recycling programs. It also criticized the United States for declining to ratify the Basel Convention, an international agreement signed by every developed country that aims to limit the export of hazardous waste. As a result, recycling in the United States are not in violation of domestic laws when they ship computer waste to other countries in Asia.

### **New Entry Ports to Bypass Ban**

China's ban on imports of many types of discarded computers and electronics, which took effect last year, led the government to seize 22 shipping containers in the port of Wenzhou in September. But recent visits to areas that have been at the center of the e-waste trade show that it continues despite the ban, though more covertly. In Guiyu, one truck after another would wound down the muddy track through town on a recent morning, bearing fresh loads of electronics. One bore stickers showing it had come from Italy, another from Korea and one from Japan. In a concrete-block building loaded with circuit boards, one load contained a sticker from New Jersey.

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