

No Wasted Words - Jews in China

What happens to the garbage you throw away every day? This is something journalist Adam Minter thought about when writing his book, *Junkyard Planet: Travels in the Billion-Dollar Trash Trade* (Bloomsbury, 2013). But it's also something he grew up with, as the fourth generation of scrap yard owners. Minter was raised in Minneapolis, where his great-grandfather had settled after emigrating from Russia and first trying his hand in Galveston, Texas. It wasn't that Minter's great-grandfather was particularly interested in scrap; circumstance drew him to the profession. Like many Jews around the turn of the last century, his grandfather met with anti-semitism in the U.S., including Minneapolis, so he took the jobs he could get.

Collecting other people's scraps was a way to make money and something the well off certainly wouldn't have done themselves. Minter gives some interesting facts about the early U.S. scrap trade and how most of the people involved in the field were from Europe. And of those, many were Eastern European Jews. In New York alone, he states, a quarter of the Jews there were in the scrap trade. This was all around 1900. Fast forward one hundred years and the leaders in the field are now from China.

Junkyard Planet is a fascinating book, not just because of the stories Minter tells about the trade, but also because his own story and that of his family are so captivating. Minter first learned about China's role in the American scrap trade when Chinese buyers came around to his family's junkyard, where he and his grandmother worked alongside his father.

"I can't recall, precisely, when the first Chinese scrap buyer appeared at the front window of my father's scrapyard. It was probably around 1994, right around the time China had begun to deregulate key industries, and private entrepreneurs had decided that scrap metal was the business where they'd strike it rich." (Page 59)

And the United States was the perfect place for Chinese scrap buyers to make their purchases. As Minter states, "I gradually came to appreciate how tightly connected Chinese demand for American recycling is to American demand for Chinese goods." (Page 84). China had the factories, but not the natural resources. The United States was the perfect hunting ground for metals such as copper.

That's where Minter introduces Johnson Zeng and Homer Lai, one of the most memorable sub-stories in this book. Imagine a lone Chinese man driving across the United States, visiting scrap yard upon scrap yard and exporting millions of pounds of metals back to China. That is Johnson Zeng. Based in Vancouver, Zeng spends half the year on the road in the United States. On the other end of the business is Homer Lai, a metals expert in Guangdong Province.

Zeng snaps photos of the scrap he finds in the U.S., sends them electronically to Lai back in China, who receives them immediately and can quickly tell Zeng how much money to offer. According to Minter's book, there at least a hundred such Chinese traders who travel around the U.S., exporting metal back to the mainland.

Waste takes on another meaning in a recent book by Michael Meyer. In *Manchuria: A Village Called Wasteland and the Transformation of Rural China* (Bloomsbury, 2015) is an absorbing look at Meyer's three years in his wife's hometown in northeast China (all while she worked in a swank law firm in Hong Kong). Aptly called Wasteland—which, incidentally, doesn't have a relationship to the scrap metal world—the town was home to a large rice producer but in recent years has been developed, thus forcing farmers into high-rise buildings and a life away from agriculture.

Although Meyer himself isn't Jewish, his book celebrates this area's vibrant history and its diverse population, including the vivacious Jewish community a century ago. Harbin is probably the most known city in Manchuria and was once home to 30,000 Jews who either moved to China from Russia for economic reasons or fled for political reasons (i.e., pogroms). Most were stateless, no longer citizens of Russia but also not of China.

According to Meyer, in the heyday of Jewish Harbin, the city boasted two synagogues and 20 Jewish periodicals, including something called the Siberia-Palestine Weekly. It was this community where the grandfather of former Israeli Prime Minister Elud Olmert lived. Olmert's grandfather is buried in the Jewish cemetery there.

A century later, the Chinese government has restored one of the two former synagogues in Harbin and has turned it into a Jewish history research center. Meyer writes that the last Jew left Harbin as late as 1985, a solid decade after the end of the Cultural Revolution. Just a few years ago the Chinese government announced that it would restore the other synagogue, which had been used as a hostel.

Visitors to Harbin today can stroll down Zhongyangdajie, or Central Boulevard—which before 1949 had been known as Kitaiskaya Street—and view plaques in English and Chinese that tell the origins of the buildings, many of which had been Russian Jewish department stores. Meyer also writes about visiting the Harbin Sister Cities Museum, which displays a yarmulke to symbolize Harbin's important role in the Jewish diaspora, once the largest in the Far East.

These two books are excellent narratives of the connections between Jews and Chinese, in niche arenas like scrap metal and far off places like northwest China. Minter and Meyer are brilliant storytellers who add to the already rich literature on China. Both books are available in hardcover, paperback, and electronic format. ♪

