

Society for the Anthropology of Work

Book Review: Waste and Wealth

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Published on: Feb 09, 2021

DOI: 10.21428/1d6be30e.d7d2b11a

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***Waste and Wealth: An Ethnography of Labor, Value, and Morality in a Vietnamese Recycling Economy*, by Minh T. N. Nguyen (2019). New York: Oxford University Press.**

Waste and Wealth is a fascinating ethnography, which provides detailed accounts of the lives of migrant waste traders in postsocialist Vietnam. Against the backdrop of Vietnam's transition from a centrally planned to a market economy, Minh T. N. Nguyen seeks to illustrate how the entanglement of global market forces and Vietnamese sociocultural norms shapes the moral lives of waste traders.

Empirically, the monograph focuses on the transformation of seemingly valueless waste into wealth. Of central concern is how these stigmatized traders *remake* their lives and social positions. Remaking, here, refers to the process of (re)valuing "material, labor, and people" (p. 5), which—according to Nguyen—has the potential to transform migrants' economic and moral lives. These acts of remaking, whereby traders generate value for their families and communities, confront them with moral challenges, which sometimes render the traders' notions of the "good life" unattainable. By placing the life stories of migrant waste traders in the context of "the political economy of remaking" (p. 9), Nguyen shows how the production of economic value is inseparable from that of moral value and is intimately connected to familial care.

The bulk of the ethnographic data in this book was collected between 2011 and 2012 in Hanoi and in Spring District (a pseudonym) in the Red River Delta of Vietnam. As a former denizen of a nearby village, Nguyen has in-depth understanding of this political and social context, which is reflected in her sympathetic and perceptive descriptions of the struggles and desires of traders. To document the mobile lives of traders who move between rural villages and the country's major cities, Nguyen followed her interlocutors from Spring District to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. These workers set up depots, accumulating and buying waste from other itinerant traders. Although the waste depot business can be lucrative and allow participants to live their desired good life in big houses, waste workers are marginalized in Vietnamese society and are viewed with moral ambivalence. As Nguyen shows, the achievement of a good life by traders often proves to be serendipitous, depending on the outcome of risk-taking against the backdrop of an unstable global economy.

Nguyen convincingly demonstrates how the global economy affects the livelihoods of traders by documenting price fluctuations for different types of waste in relation to, for instance, China-Vietnam political tensions and changing import-export agreements. She also observes an alarming rise in counterfeiting within the recycling sector. Depot operators need to possess the acumen to identify "fake waste," or discarded items that are disguised as valuable materials. For example, one waste trader purchased a truckload of used car batteries, only to discover that they were filled with cement rather than high-priced metals.

Not only does the risky waste trade provide a livelihood to migrant laborers, it also remakes gender norms in Vietnam. Nguyen notes how the common binary of inside/outside (*nội/ngoại*) sorts women and men into the domestic and public spheres, respectively. However, since women are seen as “closer to dirt” (p. 177) due to their association with cleaning work, many itinerant traders and operators of waste depots are women, whose male counterparts remain at home to assume household duties. Nguyen carefully avoids a simplistic conclusion that norms between men and women have been permanently transformed, as a more traditional gender hierarchy still very much exists. Instead, she observes that waste trading has allowed for some degree of negotiation between the inside and outside domains. In addition to blurring gender boundaries, traders often refashion their class status by donating money generated from the waste trade to community development projects. This practice of remaking cultivates a better set of circumstances for migrants’ children, providing them with the education they need for social mobility. In doing so, migrant laborers are able to transform themselves into ethical subjects and attain a higher social status.

Nevertheless, the process of remaking has its limits. Postsocialist Vietnam promotes an “ethic of striving” (p. 149), which devolves the state’s responsibility onto individuals through the notion of exemplarity. The ability to attain this personal status is connected to one’s intellectual level (*dân trí*) and also depends on one’s morality. Yet Nguyen shows that working with waste is often seen as “morally impure” (p. 105), especially since migrant traders must leave their families to work in the city, juggling their businesses with the responsibility to care for children and parents. Through the story of a married couple, of whom both are waste traders, Nguyen shows that the death of their drug-addicted son and the birth of another child with Down’s syndrome are perceived by the community as having taken place due to inadequate and disrupted care. The family is considered morally inferior despite its economic success in waste trading. This connection between intellectual level, morality, and exemplarity, Nguyen suggests, glosses over uncertainties brought about by the global economy and holds waste traders personally accountable for developing their families and communities.

The strength of the book, which was awarded the 2019 SAW Book Prize, is reflected in its lucid depictions of laborers embroiled in the dynamics of gender, class, caregiving, and the global economy. Nguyen treads a fine line between explicating the structural constraints of present-day Vietnam and waste laborers’ own efforts to remake their lives. The ethnography, furthermore, moves beyond an economistic understanding of wealth, urging the reader to see morality and exemplarity as other sources of value in postsocialist Vietnam. While the book is a welcome addition to the literature on contemporary Vietnamese society and will find a readership among anthropologists of waste and labor, the portrait it offers of migrant workers navigating the protean forces of the global economy, gender dynamics, and moral ambivalence is arguably anything but new.

Indeed, Nguyen's ethnography resonates with existing scholarship from Southeast Asia (see Derks 2008) that documents migrant workers' often herculean attempts to negotiate gender norms, translocal care, and moral expectations. Yet *Waste and Wealth* rarely brings lived experiences of familial disruptions into dialogue with wider anthropological discussions on moral breakdown (e.g., Zigon 2007; Robbins 2013). In this respect, there would have been more to gain theoretically and empirically if the author had illuminated, for instance, how disruptions of care can reshape migrants' subjectivity and identity as waste traders. And, although Nguyen successfully demonstrates that traders are capable of remaking their lives within a capricious global order, she is less persuasive in suggesting that this order can itself be remade or transformed by migrants. To equate the traders' navigation of the global economy with a wholesale remaking of it feels like wishful thinking.

The dialectical relationship between the effects of capitalism and the lives of local people is well established. Even as some, like Nguyen's waste traders, are able to manage the uncertainties of globalized capitalism and even to attain some version of the good life, this alone does not mean that the existing global order has been remade. It is no doubt exciting to imagine the remaking of the world economy as initiated from a particular locality, such as a village in rural Vietnam. Yet one also needs to envision what such an alternative order might ultimately consist of. Scholarship like Nguyen's lays the groundwork for this search for alternatives and shows just how high its stakes can be.

Author Bio

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Identify waste and remove it. Communicate with your people by showing results at the scene of action. Subsequently, the guide for lean principles was written in a book entitled "Lean Thinking: Banish Waste and Create Wealth in Your Organization" (Womack and Jones 2003). Pathways of lean manufacturing in wood and furniture industries: a bibliometric and systematic review. Article. Full-text available. Secondly, a methodological approach was employed to systematically review all papers focusing on the topic of lean manufacturing in the wood and furniture industries. Make wealth from waste. Residential societies can set up their own composting plants to tackle biodegradable waste profitably. NEXT COVERAGE. By Satwik Mudgal. Published: Monday 17 August 2015. Make wealth from waste. Green areas such as parks also produce biodegradable waste, which can be used to produce rich compost. Conservatively, every hectare of urban green produces about 100 kg of horticultural waste every day, says Saurav Bardhan, co-founder and technical head of Green Bandhu Environmental Solutions & Services, a company that runs a decentralised composting plant at Delhi University. Coronavirus News In-depth Blogs Videos Book Store Africa Climate Agriculture Gobar Times. Waste and Wealth book. Read reviews from world's largest community for readers. Waste and Wealth examines questions of value, labor, and morality underlining the translocal waste trading networks originating from a rural district in Vietnam. Considering waste as an economic category of global significance, this book shows migrant laborers' complex negotiations with political economic forces to remake their social and moral lives. It also illuminates h Waste and Wealth examines questions of value, labor, and morality underlining the translocal waste trading networks originating from a rural district in Vietnam.