

# THE MANY VALUES OF NIGHT SOIL IN WARTIME CHINA\*

## I

### NIGHT SOIL AND ITS MANY VALUES

This essay probes one of the many distinctions between pre-modern and modern life: the proximity to excrement in the one and the remove therefrom in the other. It seeks to excavate meaning from a world of chamber pots and night-soil stools tucked under beds to be emptied in the morning, the better to understand our current world of plumbing systems and flush toilets. It employs microhistorical analysis of a petition that leaders of the Chongqing night-soil porters' trade union sent to the Governor of China's Sichuan province in 1940 to examine the effects of a significant shift in olfactory sensibility. It then compares the Chongqing affair with a similar situation in 1951 Hankou in order to call attention to a crucial distinction between the Nationalist (1927–49) and Communist (1949–) states. Although the two had nearly identical sanitation agendas, Communist cadres' willingness to manipulate night-soil porters into a position of dependence on the state proved to be an essential factor in their success. They applied a fine-tuned instrument of political and emotional manipulation, guided by a class-liberation ideology. The Nationalists, by contrast, employed the blunt instrument of disciplinary force, and failed.

In an agricultural society, night soil — a potent fertilizer — had tremendous ecological, fiscal, social, political and symbolic value. Its many sources of value made it a site of sharp

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contention. When state officials sought to control the trade, those who profited from it pushed back hard. Overturning the ‘shit hegemons’ (糞霸 *fenba*) required cunning manipulation of their underlings. What compelled both Nationalist and Communist officials to assume the risk of encroaching on the territory of people who enjoyed substantial social power and financial rewards?

Ruth Rogaski coined the phrase ‘hygienic modernity’ (衛生 *weisheng*) to express the centrality of hygiene and public health reform in China’s encounter with imperialism and national formation. Rogaski theorized hygienic modernity as a goal that Chinese elites continually strive towards in the hope of achieving recognition as members of a modern, sovereign state amidst competing empires. Personal behaviours such as cleaning toilets and bathing acquired deep significance for the national collective. This was so not only because many Europeans and North Americans believed Chinese people to be inferior, but, more importantly, because the Japanese predicated their imperial expansion across Asia on a pretence to superior hygiene.<sup>1</sup> Representatives of each twentieth-century Chinese state — Manchu officials of the Qing court (1644–1911), Nationalist party statesmen of the Republic (1912–49) and Communist cadres of the People’s Republic (1949–) — faced hygienic modernity as a mandate, a *sine qua non* of modern statehood.

Sticky, smelly, oozing night soil inherently violated this goal. State officials who desired a respected place in geopolitics for China believed it necessary to control and reform the night-soil industry. That it promised handsome profits sweetened the deal. Across China, the pursuit of hygienic modernity and the lure of lucre motivated toilet and night-soil reforms. Efforts in Tianjin, Hong Kong, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, rural Guangdong, Chongqing and Hankou followed a similar blueprint, and all involved significant conflict. Crucially, those who enjoyed only partial success or suffered outright failure of their reforms included Japanese and British colonizers as well as Chinese officials.

<sup>1</sup> Ruth Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China* (Berkeley, 2004), esp. 137.

The fact that colonizers also struggled to control night soil reveals an important facet of hygienic modernity. As an ideology, it excelled at manufacturing a desired aim to constantly strive for and a belief that that aim could be achieved. Authorities often pursued reforms for decades. In Hong Kong from the late 1860s through 1911, British hygienists' dreams of instituting flush toilets were repeatedly thwarted. Colonial officials instead sold licences for dry public toilets to the highest bidder and gained some revenue, but Chinese toilet entrepreneurs enjoyed far greater returns on their investment. This granted them sufficient political clout to become 'strategic partners of the state' and enjoy a near monopoly. Despite a terrible plague epidemic in 1894 during which tests showed plague bacillus in the contents of some public toilets, the Sanitary Board lacked the regulatory power to ensure proper cleanliness of the facilities. In Tianjin, from 1907 through 1933, Chinese night-soil porters retained sole control in the Japanese concession and thwarted colonial authorities' sewage-system plans, despite the latter's conceit that they had a higher standard of cleanliness.<sup>2</sup> The exemplary Japanese could not even successfully reform the night-soil industry in their own capital, Tokyo. Its mayor Gotō Shinpei, author of many hygienic reforms as a colonial official in Taiwan and Manchuria, was unable to institute a sewage system in the metropole. Perhaps ironically, the same war that pushed China to the brink also disrupted Tokyo's supply of labour and materials to the point that its centuries-old night-soil-collection system 'had become an entirely extralegal activity' by 1945.<sup>3</sup>

Stories of Chinese toilet owners and night-soil porters besting colonial officials and colonial officials failing to reform their home countries merit attention because hygienic modernity was

<sup>2</sup> On the Japanese in Tianjin, see Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity*, 214–16. On the British in Hong Kong, see Yuk-sik Chong, 'A Night Soil Collection Point: The Public Toilets in Hong Kong, 1860s–1920s', *Social Transformations in Chinese Societies*, xii, no. 2 (2016), esp. 103–7, quote on 109. On Guangzhou, see Shuk-wah Poon, 'Cholera, Public Health, and the Politics of Water in Republican Guangzhou', *Modern Asian Studies*, xlvii, no. 2 (2013). On rural Guangdong, see Cheng Yi Meng, 'Toilets and the Tug-of-War over Night Soil: The Reconstruction of Toilets in Fengshun County, Guangdong Province, 1942–1943', *Twentieth-Century China*, xlv, no. 3 (Oct. 2020). On Communist Shanghai, see Miriam Gross, *Farewell to the God of Plague: Chairman Mao's Campaign to Deworm China* (Oakland, 2016), 197.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Kreitman, 'Attacked by Excrement: The Political Ecology of Shit in Wartime and Postwar Tokyo', *Environmental History*, xxiii (2018), 353.

at its core ‘a discourse of Chinese deficiency’, consistently presented as ‘that which the Chinese lacked, and that which the foreign Other possessed’.<sup>4</sup> Though hygienic modernity was an unachievable goal for everyone — and remains so today during a global pandemic — colonizers routinely claimed to possess it innately, even when conditions in their concession territories and home countries belied this assertion. Chinese elites largely accepted this claim of Chinese deficiency, identifying themselves with colonizers and blaming the poor and working classes for China’s hygienic shortcomings. For their part, Chongqing’s petitioners belonged to a liminal class. They enjoyed power and profit as leaders of a powerful trade union and clearly understood many aspects of high society. They used this knowledge to reject elitist presumptions that the labourers they represented were hygienically deficient. Yet they also failed to understand just how important night soil’s pungent odour was to the even more elite, and this proved detrimental to their cause.

Its high profit margins and unsavoury nature made the night-soil industry one that Joshua Goldstein characterizes as ‘allergic to state attention and regulation’. He identifies a single successful reform in Republican-era Beijing which worked because it delivered great profit to the night-soil headmen and preserved their power.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, five pressing issues compelled Nationalist officials to attempt regulation. First, night soil’s fiscal value proved tempting. Second, health officials estimated that faecal-borne diseases comprised 40 per cent of China’s disease burden; they argued for the social value of reforming night-soil collection in order to reduce disease transmission. Third, improper processing of night soil leached its essential nutrients, making it less useful to exhausted soils, and soil scientists at the National Institute of Health argued they knew how to maximize its ecological value.<sup>6</sup> Fourth, night soil

<sup>4</sup> Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity*, 301.

<sup>5</sup> Joshua Goldstein, *Remains of the Everyday: A Century of Recycling in Beijing* (Oakland, 2020), 41–2, quote on 61.

<sup>6</sup> On disease, see Joseph Needham, ‘Agricultural Sanitation in Asia’, *Nature*, clxxii, no. 4384 (7 Nov. 1953), 826–7. On soil science, see Wang Yueh, ‘The Utilization of Night-Soil as a Manure in China’, *Journal of the American Society of Agronomy*, xxxviii, no. 7 (July 1946), 573–9; Wang Yueh, 人類肥料之研究 *Renlei feiliao zhi yanjiu* [Research on Human Fertilizer], 《燕京大學研究院同學會會刊》, i (1939), 86–7.

had an ineradicable stench that offended modern sensibilities and exposed China to foreign critique. Its control, therefore, had tremendous symbolic value to a government working to regain sovereign control over all its territory. Fifth, the Chongqing night-soil industry enriched local strongmen, precisely the people whom Nationalist officials sought to replace with party loyalists. Seizing power over this lucrative trade would have held significant political value.

The War of Resistance against Japan (抗日戰爭 *KangRi zhanzheng*) (1937–45) rendered all these chronic problems acute. The Nationalist state lost two thirds of its territory and four fifths of its tax base.<sup>7</sup> Fielding battle-ready soldiers required disease prevention. Feeding the army and besieged citizens required hearty crops. Making a good impression on foreign statesmen who might offer military aid required conformity with international hygiene standards. Last, leading a nation through war required firm control of local politics in a province where underground gangs flourished and independent warlords had long defied the central state.<sup>8</sup> If Nationalist officials could seize Chongqing's night-soil industry, they could address all these acute problems at once. Unfortunately for them, success was anything but assured.

## II

### CHONGQING, 1940

Known in the English-speaking world by the euphemism 'night soil' and in China by the more candid 糞便 *fenbian* (faeces and urine), human waste is a fecund source of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. It is unclear exactly when farmers in China began to employ it as a fertilizer, but the ancient script for 'shit' (屎 *shi*), first documented in 1700 BCE, portrays a human body with rice beneath it.<sup>9</sup> Du Xinhao dates night soil's earliest use to

<sup>7</sup> Zhang Xianwen and Zhang Yufa (eds.), 中华民国专题史 *Zhonghua minguo zhuan ti shi* [Thematic History of the Republic of China] (Nanjing, 2015), xi, no. 265. On profit as supreme motive, see Meng, 'Toilets and the Tug-of-War over Night Soil', 263, 265.

<sup>8</sup> Robert A. Kapp, *Szechwan and the Chinese Republic: Provincial Militarism and Central Power, 1911–1938* (New Haven, CT, 1973); Lee McIsaac, 'The City as Nation: Creating a Wartime Capital in Chongqing', in Joseph W. Esherick (ed.), *Remaking the Chinese City: Modernity and National Identity, 1900–1950* (Honolulu, 1999), 182; G. William Skinner, *Rural China on the Eve of Revolution: Sichuan Fieldnotes, 1949–1950*, ed. Stevan Harrell and William Lavelly (Seattle, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Kreitman, 'Attacked by Excrement', 344.

the tenth century. It was particularly useful in Jiangnan, the south-eastern coastal region, where long, warm days enabled multiple rice crops each year, but intensive production required additional soil inputs. Mark Elvin identifies night soil as a crucial factor in the wet-rice agricultural revolution of the eighth to twelfth centuries. Written records clearly show that by the thirteenth century, night soil had sponsored such remarkable increases in crop output that its trade had become a profitable business in Hangzhou. Eventually, night soil was used all over China, albeit with local variations in practice, most notably between the north, where urban porters tended to be exclusively male and farmers employed dried night-soil patties, and the south, where both men and women worked as porters and night soil often remained in liquid form.<sup>10</sup>

A vibrant night-soil economy linked wartime Chongqing, like most Chinese cities, to surrounding farm fields in a reciprocal relationship. City residents provided their faeces and urine to farmers, who used the matter to grow the crops they sold to landless urbanites, whose consumption thereof replenished the night-soil buckets. Night-soil porters sustained this exchange. Porters made their rounds through the city early each morning, ringing distinctive bells to alert residents of their arrival. Carefully staying within their assigned territory, each porter gathered the contents of residents' night stools and paid the producers. The porter deposited each household's product into one of two open buckets, then carried both on a shoulder pole to Chaotianmen, Chongqing's iconic wharf at the isthmus jutting into the waters of the Yangtze and Jialing rivers. About eighty night-soil masters (糞伏頭 *fenfu tou*) and 170 porters worked at each of several ports, where guild managers completed the

<sup>10</sup> Du Xinhao, 《金汁：中国传统肥料知识与技术实践研究，10—19世纪》 *Jin zhi: Zhongguo chuantong feiliao zhishi yu jishu shijian yanjiu* [Gold Juice: Research on China's Traditional Fertilizer Knowledge and Technological Practice, 10th–19th Centuries] (Beijing, 2018); Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* (Stanford, 1973), 113, 118–20; F. H. King, *Farmers of Forty Centuries: Organic Farming in China, Korea, and Japan* (Mineola, NY, 2004 [1911]); Li Bozhong, 明清江南肥料需求的数量分析 *Ming-Qing Jiangnan feiliao xiuqi de shuliang fenxi* [A Quantitative Analysis of the Demand for Fertilizer in the Jiangnan Region during the Ming and Qing Periods] *Qingshi yanjiu* [Studies in Qing History], no. 1 (1999), 30–8; Donald Worster, 'The Good Muck: Toward an Excremental History of China', *Rachel Carson Center Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society*, 2017, no. 5, 29–30, <<https://doi.org/doi.org/10.5282/rcc/8135>>.

first stage of processing, then ferried the night soil downriver to sell to farmers who completed its transformation into fertilizer.<sup>11</sup>

Urban porters also gathered night soil from public toilets, which yielded considerable revenue. People who availed themselves of such facilities were a source of double profit for their owners: a user fee collected at the door, and the deposits of their bowels and bladders, for which farmers paid a handsome price. These two sources of revenue more than recompensed toilet owners' expenses in materials and government licensing fees, though both colonial and native governments also reaped considerable rewards from licence sales.<sup>12</sup> Small wonder, then, that Nationalist officials began investigating public toilets immediately upon settling in Chongqing in October 1938.<sup>13</sup>

Employees of the Chongqing Bureau of Public Health (重慶市衛生局 *Chongqingshi weishengju*; CBPH) surveyed public toilets in their first month of operation, November 1938. They answered to the decrees of the Executive Yuan, worked closely with police officers (who had previously taken charge of all health matters) and 'faced a mandate to clean' Chongqing in order to 'prove it a capital city worthy of a modern, sovereign nation'. In 1927, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek stated that rigorous public health reforms could help his government regain territorial control over foreign concessions. Chongqing had been China's westernmost treaty port from 1901 to 1931 when Japan occupied a concession there. By the time the Nationalists made it their wartime capital in late 1938 the Japanese had left, but sojourning ambassadors, journalists, missionaries, military attachés and the like ensured that watchful foreign eyes were a ubiquitous presence. They

<sup>11</sup> 重慶市政府公報 *Chongqing shizhengfu gongbao* [Bulletin of the Chongqing Municipal Government] (Chongqing: Chongqing Municipal Government, 1940), vols. 6–7, 105; Sonya Grypma, *Healing Henan: Canadian Nurses at the North China Mission, 1888–1947* (Vancouver, 2008), 82; Hanchao Lu, *Beyond the Neon Lights: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, 1999), 189–98; Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity*, 209; Xinzhong Yu, 'The Treatment of Night Soil and Waste in Modern China', in Angela Ki Che Leung and Charlotte Furth (eds.), *Health and Hygiene in Chinese East Asia: Policies and Publics in the Long Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Chong, 'A Night Soil Collection Point'; Meng, 'Toilets and the Tug-of-War over Night Soil'.

<sup>13</sup> *Chongqingshi weishengju gongzuo baogao* 重慶市衛生局工作報告 Chongqing Bureau of Public Health (hereafter CBPH) Work Report, 5–10 December, 1938, Chongqing Municipal Archives (hereafter CMA), 66-1-2, 187.

looked out on a city with a long-standing reputation as ‘one of China’s poorest and dirtiest’, with few macadamized roads, mostly human-powered traffic and hundreds of water- and night-soil porters carrying loaded buckets on shoulder poles. What limited plumbing had been installed in the mid-1930s was destroyed in the first Japanese air raid, in May 1939.<sup>14</sup>

Under this watchful gaze, China’s toilet and night-soil reforms had political and symbolical value because they accorded with the sensory facets of imperialism’s civilizing mission, what Andrew Rotter terms ‘the olfactory biopolitics of empire’ and Paul Kreitman the ‘colonising nostril’.<sup>15</sup> Britons and Americans, who gained access to China through gunboat diplomacy, associated it with the smell of shit. The sensibility of foreign noses became an acute problem in the nineteenth century, when the ‘ubiquitous presence of human excrement and trash in late imperial cities was one of the most visible [and smellable] and thus most criticized aspects of Chinese life’.<sup>16</sup> British visitors were particularly troublesome. Their staunch faith in miasma theory led them to experience the smell of night soil as not just unpleasant but also dangerous to health, potentially even fatal. Colonel G. J. Wolseley, in Tianjin in 1860 as commander of British troops in the Arrow War, wrote that his experience ‘amongst the highly-manured fields’ around the city ‘rudely assaulted’ his nose.<sup>17</sup> The association between China and stench had remarkable staying power. In the oral history interviews she gave half a century after her 1923 arrival in China, American missionary Margaret Simkin recalled distinct memories of the smells she encountered there, notably that of night soil. She described them as ‘all sorts of strange, odd, to us, smells, *so characteristic of China*’.<sup>18</sup> Martha Gellhorn, wife of Ernest Hemingway, war correspondent and celebrated writer in

<sup>14</sup> Nicole Elizabeth Barnes, *Intimate Communities: Wartime Healthcare and the Birth of Modern China, 1937–1945* (Oakland, 2018), 22; McIsaac, ‘City as Nation’, 177, 182.

<sup>15</sup> Kreitman, ‘Attacked by Excrement’; Andrew J. Rotter, *Empires of the Senses: Bodily Encounters in Imperial India and the Philippines* (New York, 2019), 160–86.

<sup>16</sup> Yu, ‘Treatment of Night Soil’, 51.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity*, 84. On smell as dangerous, see Rotter, *Empires of the Senses*, 164, 172.

<sup>18</sup> Margaret Timberlake Simkin Oral History, Claremont Graduate School Oral History Project, 27 Jan. 1970 and 10 Dec. 1971, Yale Day Divinity Library, Record Group 8, box 227, folder 6, 35. Emphasis added.



her own right, declared that 'in fifty years of travel, China stands out in particular loo-going horror'.<sup>19</sup> According to anthropologist Bill Callahan's film *Toilet Adventures*, many foreigners, including some expatriate Chinese, still recoil at Chinese toilets.<sup>20</sup> In my personal experience leading international groups to the country for what is usually their first time, a prior association of China with rubbish and poo is so strong that people are shocked at the cleanliness of tier-one cities.

Chinese elites yearned to challenge this association. There was no better location for seeking redress than the wartime capital, where Nationalist authorities continued their treaty renegotiations and courted military allies. In February 1940, Chongqing mayor Wu Guozhen 吳國楨 designed a new management system for the collection, transit and sale of night soil. He created the Night Soil Management Bureau (糞便管理所 *Fenbian guanlisuo*) and appointed head of the CBPH Sanitation Brigade Liu Nu'an 劉怒安 as its first manager. He granted the new bureau 40,000 yuan to purchase equipment and hire porters and mandated that it commence operations in March.<sup>21</sup> For the first time in centuries, employees of a central state agency aimed to do the work of an established guild, in a city known for powerful guilds and indomitable local leaders. This was a revolutionary change in Chinese statecraft.<sup>22</sup>

It also signalled the arrival in Chongqing of a distinctly modern obsession with odour. CBPH employees identified the elimination of 'noxious air' (穢氣 *huiqi*), rather than faecal contamination of water, as the chief goal. They instructed the Sanitation Brigade (清潔隊 *qingjie dui*) to collect night soil in tightly lidded (rather than open) wooden buckets and transport it downriver in lidded boats.<sup>23</sup> Similar reforms had taken place elsewhere. Late nineteenth-century regulations in Shanghai, Fuzhou and Hankou controlled odour by

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Peter Moreira, *Hemingway on the China Front: His WWII Spy Mission with Martha Gellhorn* (Washington, DC, 2007), 89.

<sup>20</sup> Bill Callahan, *Toilet Adventures*. See <<https://vimeo.com/113096878>> (accessed 13 Dec. 2021).

<sup>21</sup> *Chongqing shizhengfu gongbao*, 129–31.

<sup>22</sup> William T. Rowe, *Hankow: Conflict and Community in a Chinese City, 1796–1895* (Stanford, 1989), 171.

<sup>23</sup> CBPH Work Report, January–June 1940, CMA, 66-1-3.

mandating the use of covered buckets and banning porters from wealthy neighbourhoods. In mid-eighteenth-century France, managing smells became a central feature of urban life. Decreased tolerance of odours in France likely had an effect on China, where the French had a permanently docked military boat in Chongqing as well as concession territories in Shanghai and Tianjin, the native city of CBPH director Mei Yilin 梅貽琳.<sup>24</sup>

The plan to deodorize Chongqing streets failed because night-soil porters refused to work for the new agency. In the month it was mandated to begin operations, March 1940, five executive council members and ten representatives of the Chongqing Fertilizer Industry Trade Union sent a savvy petition to the Governor of Sichuan province — Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek himself at the time — claiming that the CBPH had unlawfully deprived them of their employ, and demanding rectification (see the Appendix for a complete English translation). The petition clearly signalled its authors' high social standing. Composed with the standard contractual terms of the period and in handsome calligraphy — a powerful signifier of elite status — the petition cunningly used the state's language to refute its power. Union leaders affixed their chops (official stamps) to the petition, as scholars and officials would do, rather than 'signing' with thumbprints, as illiterate people would have done. They opened with a statement designed to establish their political credentials and social respectability as law-abiding citizens of a Republic that valued private property.

We are reporting an unlawful seizure of our profession, which has severed us from our livelihood, and request your assistance in putting a stern stop to this affair. We have records that all toilets on all streets and alleys in both the municipal and surrounding areas of Chongqing pertain to our private industry, [the rights to] which we either own through inheritance, or purchased with money, or pay for through land rent; in each case we have written contracts to prove this. All excrement and urine inside the toilets is to be transported by us on shoulder pole, per our private industry, and sold to farmers. In the past

<sup>24</sup> Rowe, *Hankow: Conflict and Community*, 170; David S. Barnes, 'Scents and Sensibilities: Disgust and the Meanings of Odors in Late Nineteenth-Century Paris', *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques*, xxviii, no. 1 (Spring 2002); Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Cambridge, MA, 1986); Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit*, trans. Nadia Benabid and Rodolphe el-Khoury (Cambridge, MA, 2000).

our group was called Wuhua (五花), now we are named the Fertilizer Industry Trade Union (肥料業工會 *Feiliaoye gonghui*). The Party and Government have a file on this that can be verified.<sup>25</sup>

The petition opened with an announcement of social conformity, expressed in the language of governance. Guild registration marked compliance with orthodox culture and distinction from gangs (at least on paper). Both guilds and gangs gave order and structure to cities where hundreds of night-soil porters plied the streets alongside water porters, peddlers, rickshaw pullers and beggars. To the uninformed eye, such people looked like a hodgepodge of the destitute swarming public thoroughfares. One Frenchman stationed in Chongqing during the war called them 'atrocious half-corpses that line the streets' ('demi-cadavres atroces qui jalonnent les rues').<sup>26</sup>

People who understood the function and power of guilds and gangs in Chinese society saw things differently. Every person who worked in public spaces had a distinct place in an urban social order whose regimentation belied the chaos of poverty. Beggars and manual labourers of all kinds, including night-soil porters, could not survive on their own. If not registered with a guild, they worked under the auspices of a gang lord who delineated their turf and defended its borders, protected them from encroachers and demanded a hefty cut of their proceeds in return for these services. Street life was tough, and both gang lords and their protégés frequently used violence to keep and restore order.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> 呈為違奪產業斷絕生活，協請嚴令制止事，綠渝埠城廂及南北岸各街巷各廁，係民等私有產業，或祖遺繼承，或金幣賣得，或租佃所有，均有契約可憑，廁內糞溺向由民等各按所有私業挑運賣與農人。民幫昔名五花，今名肥料業工會，黨部政府立案可核。 *Chengwei weiduo chanye duanjue shenghuo, xieqing yanling zhizhi shi, lu Yu bu chengxiang ji nanbei an ge jixiang ge ce, xi mindeng siyou chanye, huo zuyi jicheng, huo jinbi maide, huo zidian suoyou, junyou qiye keping, cenei femiao xiangyou mindeng ge'an suoyou siye tiaoyun maiyu nongren. Minbang ximing Wuhua, jinming Feiliaoye gonghui, dangbu zhengfu li'an kehe.* 重慶市肥料業運輸職業工會至四川省政府主席之請願書 *Chongqingshi feiliaoye yunshu zhiye gonghui zhi Sichuansheng zhengfu zhuxi zhi qingyuanshu* [Petition from the Chongqing Municipal Fertilizer Industry Trade Union to the Governor of Sichuan], March 1940, SPA 113-1-637, 59 (hereafter Petition).

<sup>26</sup> R. de Muerville, *La Chine du Yang-tse* (Paris: Payot, 1946), 148. Translation mine.

<sup>27</sup> This was the case in cities across China. Goldstein, *Remains of the Everyday*, 39–44; Gross, *Farewell to the God of Plague*, 197; Lu, *Beyond the Neon Lights*, 193–4; Hanchao Lu, *Street Criers: A Cultural History of Chinese Beggars* (Stanford, 2005); Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity*, 209–11, 214–15; Rowe, *Hankow: Conflict and Community*, 199; David Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing: City People and Politics in the 1920s* (Berkeley, 1989), 154–5.

Gang lords also leveraged their facility with elite culture — especially their literacy — to monopolize the labour of desperately poor, illiterate workers. The system worked precisely because of the social chasm separating the two groups. Each had skills and abilities that the other needed. Gang lords needed night-soil porters to do the work that everyone else refused to do, but porters' precarity as low-skill manual labourers left them vulnerable to predation. Gang lords, for their part, gained social legitimacy by exercising their power to protect. The more they demonstrated their ability to defend the defenceless, the more their own peers respected their power and the more their social inferiors requested access to the same.

This cultural symbiosis between the urban poor and gang lords partly explains a curious overlapping of orthodox and heterodox in Chinese street life. The first parallel is observable in function. Guilds and trade unions, a highly visible and orthodox part of the sociopolitical culture, operated in much the same way as underground gangs. Amongst Chongqing's diverse array of trading companies, trade associations and guilds were those representing trades that required people to be on the streets — water porters, night-soil porters, sedan-chair bearers and rickshaw pullers. These guilds tightly controlled districts of operation throughout the late imperial era, in much the same way as 'beggar kings' and gang lords. Guild leaders used regulations to govern districts and members' behaviour therein to promote the smooth functioning of those districts.<sup>28</sup> The second parallel between guilds and gangs is observable in structure. Guild membership was voluntary but vetted, and members selected their leaders in an open election process. To join a secret society, one had to gain the support of several existing members, undergo a family background check, attend a formal ceremony and take an oath to the organization. Gang members selected their leaders through extensive negotiation amongst themselves.<sup>29</sup> Since both guilds and gangs controlled membership and leader selection on their own terms, men who

<sup>28</sup> Robert A. Kapp, 'Chungking as a Center of Warlord Power, 1926–1937', in Mark Elvin and G. William Skinner (eds.), *The Chinese City between Two Worlds* (Stanford, 1974), 143–5; Zhou Yong, ed., 重慶通史 *Chongqing tongshi* [A Comprehensive History of Chongqing], 2 vols. (Chongqing, 2002), ii, 523–4, 527.

<sup>29</sup> Di Wang, *Violence and Order on the Chengdu Plain: The Story of a Secret Brotherhood in Rural China, 1939–1949* (Stanford, 2018), 80, 98.

had power in local society could hold positions in both at the same time, with one position publicly known and one known only to fellow society members. This was particularly the case in Sichuan, where the dominant gang, Paoge 袍哥 or 'Robed Brothers', held such power in the 1940s that state officials often lacked autonomous governing capacity and gang members were 'de facto leaders of their local places'. In many places Paoge men *were* the local officials. In Chongqing, Paoge notables Xia Zhishi 夏之時 (1887–1950) and Zhang Peijue 張培爵 (1876–1915) were warlords in the early years of the Republic. Orthodox and heterodox overlapped and intertwined, such that social historian of Sichuan Di Wang cautions against 'underestim[ing] the full spectrum of non-state power', which he argues 'played a crucial role in everyday life' and contributed to social stability.<sup>30</sup>

Key to analysis of the petition is the fact that, whether night-soil porters worked under the auspices of a secret society or of a registered guild, they rarely worked independently. They were beholden to another entity whose distinct relationship with the state granted it power both to protect and abuse them. As the stories of Chongqing and Hankou illustrate, Communist cadres understood this simultaneous control and protection as a stabilizing force in local society, and astutely secured a new social order while upending the status quo. In Chongqing, Nationalist officials' failure to do the same became their downfall.

Available clues indicate that Chongqing's Fertilizer Industry Trade Union functioned on this razor's edge between licit and illicit. Liu Yingzhou 劉瀛洲, chairman of the board of directors, may have been the man of said name who in 1936 was apprehended for grave robbing and banditry.<sup>31</sup> The petitioners clearly understood that government officials saw them as a threat, even as they believed themselves threatened by those

<sup>30</sup> Warlords as modernizers: Kristin Stapleton, *Civilizing Chengdu: Chinese Urban Reform, 1895–1937* (Cambridge, MA, 2000). Paoge power in rural Sichuan: Isabel Brown Crook and Christina Kelley Gilmartin, with Yu Xiji, *Prosperity's Predicament: Identity, Reform, and Resistance in Rural Wartime China*, ed. and comp. Gail Hershatter and Emily Honig (Lanham, MD, 2013), 121–50, 268. Paoge warlords in Chongqing: Liu Tinggang, Tang Xinglu and Mi Yungang, *四川袍哥史稿 Sichuan paoge shigao* [A History of Sichuan Robed Brothers] (Chengdu, 2015), 169–72. Paoge in Sichuan politics: Wang, *Violence and Order*, 86, 93–4, 98. Quote on pp. 93–4.

<sup>31</sup> 大批盜墓慣匪 'Dapi daomu guanfer' [A Large Group of Grave Robbers and Hardened Bandits], *Huabei ribao*, 27 July 1936.

same authority figures. To present their claim as valid, therefore, they attempted to appear simultaneously authoritative and vulnerable, and vacillated between those positions. Immediately after declaring their lawful guild registration, they adopted the voice of the meek, stating, ‘We are mostly exceptionally poor, lonely widows who hire porters to carry the loads, while the rest of us do the bitter labour ourselves so as to make a living’.<sup>32</sup> This was a crafty rhetorical move. For centuries, widows had enjoyed legal rights that no other woman could exercise: to control property and refuse remarriage. Culturally, chaste widows signalled peerless virtue and self-sacrifice for the patriarchal family.<sup>33</sup> But the petitioners themselves were almost certainly not widows. Judging by the characters in their names, the fifteen signatories were all men. Some of the porters they represented could have been widows, but likely some were men, since southern cities usually had both male and female porters. This apparently false identity claim betrayed the petitioners’ knowledge of widows’ powers in the courtroom, which affirmed their status as learned individuals with cultural power. It also enhanced their effort to paint themselves as morally upright but piteous workers who deserved both respect and sympathy.

The petitioners consistently used such doublespeak to embrace the *idea* of achieving modernity and national strength through hygienic practices, while pointedly rejecting state control of the night-soil industry because it encroached on their profits. After claiming a wretched state as ‘exceptionally poor, lonely widows’, the petitioners returned to a position of power by repeating their claim to private property protected by law. They wrote, ‘All of the toilets belong to our private industry, which like other people’s fields, land and real estate is protected by law. Others have no right to encroach upon and seize it’.<sup>34</sup> In likening their latrines to agricultural fields — the most common and respectable type of property in China — they strengthened the associative link between the filthy *métier* of transporting

<sup>32</sup> 民等會中，多極貧孀孤，雇伏挑運，餘係自苦挑運為生活。 *Mindeng huizhong, duo jipin shuang gu, gu fu tiaoyun, yu xi ziku tiaoyun wei shenghuo*. Petition, 59.

<sup>33</sup> Kathryn Bernhardt, *Women and Property in China, 960–1949* (Stanford, 1999); Matthew H. Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, 2000), 172. I thank Quinn Javers for his insight on widows.

<sup>34</sup> 各廁為民等私有產業，與世人私有田土房屋，同似法律保護，不許他人侵佔。 *Gece wei mindeng siyou chanye, yu shiren siyou tiantu fangwu, tongsi falü baohu, buxu taren qinzhan*. Petition, 59.

excrement and the nutritious crops that farmers delivered to urban markets. Several lines later they repeated this refrain:

Just as with privately held plots of land, the law does not allow toilets in our privately held industry to be commandeered. Like grain in the farmers' fields, the law does not allow the usurpation of the excrement and urine they contain. . . . The common right to land within the Three Principles of the People takes as its postulate that when people have fields to plough, they have food to eat . . . One might tell us to change professions, but may we ask, if our fields and property are confiscated, and we do not have even an inch of land, nor any education, how are we to earn a living? How are we to withstand this [usurpation of our property] . . . that harms the livelihoods of over twenty thousand people and treats us with utter disregard?<sup>35</sup>

This passage affirms the petitioners' savvy understanding of state rhetoric. For centuries, Chinese statecraft had grounded the emperor's right to rule in his ability to secure the people's well-being by protecting agricultural production. After the establishment of the new Republic in January 1912, this philosophy was encapsulated in revolutionary Dr Sun Yat-sen's (1866–1925) Three Principles of the People (三民主義 *sanmin zhuyi*): nationalism (民族 *minzu*), democracy (民權 *minquan*) and people's livelihood (民生 *minsheng*). Following imperial precedent, the Principles maintained popular welfare as a central goal in statecraft. In likening their usurped toilets to land, the petitioners insinuated that Nationalist officials were betraying the ideals of the 'father of the nation' (國父 *guofu*). This delivered a belly punch to the precarious state. Both the Nationalist and Communist parties — contenders in a temporarily muted civil war — staked a large portion of their political legitimacy on claims of faithful allegiance to Dr Sun's legacy.<sup>36</sup>

Of the Three Principles, 'people's livelihood' (民生 *minsheng*, sometimes translated as 'socialism') most directly addressed poverty, by advocating for equal distribution of resources. In a series of lectures delivered in August 1924, Dr Sun explained

<sup>35</sup> 民等私有業各厠，猶人私有田土，似法不許侵佔，其厠內糞溺猶人田內禾稼，似法不許竊取。 . . . 即三民主義平均地權，以人有地耕有飯吃為原則。 . . . 假謂改業謀生，猶如沒人田屋，試問人無寸土，手無一文，將何謀生。將就該。 . . . 危害，民會二萬餘人生活性命草菅何忍[?] *Mindeng siyou ye gece, youren siyou tiantu, sifa buxu zhanduo, qi cenei fenniao youren tiannei hejia, sifa buxu qiequ . . . Ji Sanmin zhuyi pingjun diquan, yi renyou digeng you fanchi wei yuanze . . . Jia wei gaiye mousheng, youru meiren tianwu, shiwen ren wu cun tu, shou wu yi wen, jiang he mousheng. Jiang jiu gai . . . wei hai, minhu erwan yuren shenghuo xingming caojian he ren[?].* Petition, 59–60.

<sup>36</sup> Henrietta Harrison, *China (Inventing the Nation)* (Oxford, 2001), 184–8.

this principle as a means of adapting Communism to China, where landowners, rather than industrialists, constituted the capitalist class and most people lived in poverty.<sup>37</sup> Sun's critique was decidedly anti-imperialist and verged on being anti-capitalist. In a rather ironic twist, the petitioners employed Sun's principle in rhetorical defence of their power to exploit poor labourers. Perhaps they astutely observed that, as a doctrine of the Nationalist party, 'people's livelihood' was often invoked to support public health regulations. In 1929 a Nationalist representative stated that 'hygiene is the strong, secure base of the people's livelihood'.<sup>38</sup>

Another keen observation the petitioners made pertained to the tight relationship between hygienic modernity and the police. They claimed, 'We have undergone training with the Public Security Bureau several times, and like police officers at all times and places we urge people to pay close attention to cleanliness and hygiene'.<sup>39</sup> The Nationalist state primarily instituted public health through disciplinary regulation and policing. This put China squarely in the political mainstream. In the 1890s both Japan's Meiji government and select cities in China's Qing empire adopted the institution of medical police following the French model. First employed in late eighteenth-century Prussia, and in France at the turn of the nineteenth century, medical police enforced compliance with unpopular public health regulations such as quarantine, mandatory disinfection and compulsory vaccination.<sup>40</sup> In Chongqing, prior to the establishment of the

<sup>37</sup> Chu-yuan Cheng, 'The Originality and Creativity of Sun Yat-Sen's Doctrine and its Relevancy to the Contemporary World', *American Journal of Chinese Studies* x, no. 2 (Oct. 2003); Sun Yat-sen, 三民主義 *Sanmin zhuyi* [The Three Principles of the People] (Taipei, 1985), 361–78.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Andrew Morris, '“Fight for Fertilizer!” Excrement, Public Health, and Mobilization in New China', *Journal of Unconventional History*, x, no. 3 (Spring 1995), 53.

<sup>39</sup> 民等數經公安局訓練，併有警士隨時隨地指導注重清潔【衛】生。 *Mindeng shujing Gong'anju xunlian, bingyou jingshi suishisuidi zhidao zhuzhong qingjie [wei] sheng*, Petition, 59.

<sup>40</sup> Matthew Ramsey, 'Public Health in France', in Dorothy Porter (ed.), *The History of Public Health and the Modern State* (Amsterdam, 1994), 55; George Rosen, 'The Fate of the Concept of Medical Police, 1780–1890', *Centaurus*, v. no. 2 (June 1957), 97 (republished in 2008); Mahito H. Fukuda, 'Public Health in Modern Japan: From Regimen to Hygiene', in Porter, ed., *The History of Public Health*, 391; Stapleton, *Civilizing Chengdu*, 56, 136; Di Wang, *Street Culture in Chengdu: Public Space, Urban Commoners, and Local Politics, 1870–1930* (Stanford, 2003), 59, 98, 131–60.



CBPH in November 1938, the Bureau of Police had taken charge of all public health affairs, and police officers regularly enforced public health regulations throughout the 1940s.<sup>41</sup> The petitioners well understood this. While it is doubtful that all porters consistently admonished people to follow sanitary laws, they made this assertion to enhance their claim to legality, as well as to hedge against allegations of unsanitary behaviour.

But a claim solely to good hygiene would not convince. The petitioners therefore made a sound rhetorical move to portray themselves also as *morally* clean and respectful of the law. They signalled this by hanging their rhetoric on the sacrosanct doctrine of people's livelihood and crafting an allegation of 'unlawful seizure' of their property. They also revealed a key piece of information: *we know our enemy by name*. They wrote,

we have done nothing against the law, but the traitor Liu Mingcheng 劉明誠, who coveted control of the waste company for the sake of control alone, deceived the Public Security Bureau and hatched a sly plan to take illegal possession of our private latrine industry and use our good reputation for his personal gain.<sup>42</sup>

In a country at war, the epithet 'traitor' carried the strongest possible charge of immorality. This word was the keystone in their depiction of Liu Mingcheng as treacherous, deceitful and greedy.

Mr Liu may have been a knave. More likely, he was a hapless worker in a nascent public health system that struggled to maintain basic sanitation. He reappeared in the CBPH records three years later, head of a team charged with cleaning up the mess his accusers had created in retaliation against him.<sup>43</sup> But the petitioners believed themselves righteous complainants in a battle of morals. They drove home the point by closing with the most powerful moral discourse of their era: nationalism.

We should make use of waste products and increase their usefulness for the nation. Consider for example that in opening up new lands to cultivation in *the treasured lands of Sichuan's border regions* we transform the periphery into gold. Why illegally appropriate people's private

<sup>41</sup> Barnes, *Intimate Communities*, 22, 33–4, 39–42.

<sup>42</sup> 與法並無不合，乃奸人劉明誠，覬覦前控垃圾公司名義，欺瞞公安局，籍圖奪佔民等私有廁產漁利，經民等聲明取銷。Yu fa bing wubuhe, nai jianren Liu Mingcheng, jiyu qian kong laji gongsi mingyi, qimeng Gong'anju, jietu duozhan mindeng siyou cechuan yuli, jing mindeng shengming quxiao. Petition, 59.

<sup>43</sup> 關於派工清理垃圾，廁所便溺的簽呈，函 Guanyu paigong qingli laji, cesuo bianniao de qiancheng, han [Report and Correspondence Regarding Dispatching a Worker to Clear Away Garbage, Urine and Excrement from the Toilets], April–May 1943, CMA, 66-1-63 (hereafter, Report and Correspondence).

latrines and sell the night soil as a profiteer? [This makes us] the laughing stock of powerful nations, and it will hurt our national prestige.<sup>44</sup>

Night soil is not shit, they conclude: it is gold.<sup>45</sup> This rhetoric drove at a poignant reality. It reminded Chiang Kai-shek of his government's precariousness in Sichuan and the desperate need to gain local power lest his state be perceived as illegitimate or, worse, be infiltrated by the enemy. Stabilizing the border regions was indeed one of Generalissimo Chiang's obsessions.<sup>46</sup> The insistence that judicious use of night soil would secure China's borderlands may sound hyperbolic, but the claim was on point. Security in outlying territory and proper care of agricultural lands mattered to a besieged country.

The Chinese people's survival in the war depended on many things, none more fundamental than food. Farmers in wartime had to feed more people from less land. Millions of refugees fled occupied areas for 'Free China' — made up of interior provinces under Nationalist control — swelling its population by 25 per cent, from 180 to 230 million. Meanwhile, the Japanese military's economic blockade and occupation of coastal cities, coupled with the destruction of transportation infrastructure, made importing chemical fertilizers and guano nearly impossible.<sup>47</sup> This occurred when soils were already near exhaustion from centuries of intensive production. Returns from greater labour investment had begun to diminish in the seventeenth century (late Ming), and throughout the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), soils had been so poor that farmers had had to steadily increase fertilizer inputs just to maintain a stagnant output.<sup>48</sup> The situation was dire. By 1947, American missionary and agricultural economist John Lossing Buck could assert that three quarters of Chinese farmers had reported a shortage of fertilizers over the previous decade. Rice farmers suffered acute shortages of nitrogen and phosphorus, key

<sup>44</sup> 將就利用廢物，增加國用。論四川邊為寶庫間墾則遍地黃金。何違法奪人民私有各廁賣糞漁利貽笑列強，有傷國體。 *Jiang jiu liyong feiwu, zengjia guoyong. Lun Sichuan bian wei baokujian ken ze biandi huangjin. He weifa duo renmin siyou ge ce mai fen yuli yixiao lieqiang, youshang guoti.* Petition, 59–60. Emphasis added.

<sup>45</sup> The expression 'night soil is money' in south-eastern China reflected a similar attitude. Yu, 'Treatment of Night Soil', 55.

<sup>46</sup> Hans van de Ven, Diana Lary and Stephen R. MacKinnon (eds.), *Negotiating China's Destiny in World War II* (Stanford, 2015).

<sup>47</sup> Meng, 'Toilets and the Tug-of-War over Night Soil', 253.

<sup>48</sup> Yong Xue, 'A "Fertilizer Revolution"? A Critical Response to Pomeranz's Theory of "Geographic Luck"', *Modern China*, xxxii, no. 2 (April 2007), 215.

components of night soil. In southern China, farmers remained dependent on night soil long after the 1950s land reform.<sup>49</sup> Chongqing's night-soil headmen understood the tremendous value of their product.

In another way, they got it all wrong. They presumed the state appropriation of private latrines would humiliate China, but the opposite was true. It was its night-soil porters and 'shit economy' that rendered China 'the laughing stock of powerful nations', not a government determined to sanitize an industry known for its sensory offence. The petitioners' ultimate weakness was their failure fully to understand that hygienic modernity aligned with bourgeois sensibilities and imperial power in its revulsion at the odour of excrement. They addressed what they assumed were government officials' chief concerns — they belonged to a registered trade union, they had trained with the Public Security Bureau, they admonished people into hygienic behaviour, they stood on the moral high ground, they cared about the nation — but they never mentioned the inevitable smell of their product. This was a breaking point. Even health officials had cited a desire to control stench rather than concern for disease transmission as the primary motivator of the new night-soil management scheme.

The spring of 1940 marks a moment of rupture in olfactory sensibility. All humans perceive scents, but whether or not they provoke disgust and to what degree they do so is profoundly contingent upon culture and time, with remarkable variation. Londoners and Parisians had certainly smelled human excrement before their respective 'Great Stinks' of the nineteenth century, yet in both cases it was during high modernity that people made a stink about it and demanded government action.<sup>50</sup> Writing of Tokugawa- and Meiji-era Japan, David Howell argues that night soil's 'utility trump(ed) its yuckiness'.<sup>51</sup> The same could be said of

<sup>49</sup> J. Lossing Buck, 'Soils and Land Use in China', *Soil Science Society of America Journal*, xii (1948), 13–14; Peter J. Hotez, 'China's Hookworms', *The China Quarterly*, no. 172 (Dec. 2002), 1031.

<sup>50</sup> David S. Barnes, 'Confronting Sensory Crisis in the Great Stinks of London and Paris', in William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson (eds.), *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life* (Minneapolis, 2005).

<sup>51</sup> David L. Howell, 'Fecal Matters: Prolegomenon to a History of Shit in Japan', in Ian Jared Miller, Julia Adeney Thomas and Brett L. Walker (eds.), *Japan at Nature's Edge: The Environmental Context of a Global Power* (Honolulu, 2013), 138, 148.

China in the 1940s, where many people recognized the value of human waste to farmlands, as well as the value of its collection to cleaning the city. Chongqing's night-soil porters tolerated the smell of their product, while health officials abhorred it. The difference in attitudes made all the difference in this drama. In the new choreography of citizenship, hygienic modernity played a starring role, and night-soil workers were at a disadvantage. Yet the petitioners did not even address the fact that the indelible stench of their *métier* made them always already deficient in the eyes of the authorities. To protect their political and financial capital, they claimed they could simultaneously maintain their control of night-soil porters *and* promote hygienic modernity. But their definition thereof had nothing to do with smell.

They were not the only party to fail in this fiasco. Nationalist officials' inability to wrest control over night-soil porters from the guild leaders had disastrous consequences. The petitioners first stated: 'we have carried on as usual, carting away the waste from all of our privately owned toilets'. Yet they closed with a threat that, should the Governor fail to act, the trade union's more than twenty thousand members would 'die without peace [,] with a grudge in [their] hearts' (死不瞑目 *sibumingmu*).<sup>52</sup> The tidy solution the petitioners demanded — that all latrines in question be returned to the porters' control within the week — was not adopted. Instead, the protesting porters ceased to cart away the waste, and it began to pile up because CBPH employees also failed to clear the latrines of their fetid contents. Citing lack of staff and funding, within one year the CBPH had disbanded its Night Soil Management Branches and transferred its tasks to the Head Sanitation Brigade. The system soon broke down again. Health officials then required 保甲 *baojia* neighbourhood association heads to assign their residents to unpaid rotational lavatory duty.<sup>53</sup> But unremunerated dirty work

<sup>52</sup> 民等私有厠各照舊有管業挑運迄今。 *Mindeng siyou ge ce zhaojiu you guanyue tiaoyun qijin*. Petition, 59–60. It is doubtful that Chongqing had twenty thousand porters. Yong Xue calculates that late imperial Suzhou, with a population of 840,000, had about a thousand. Yong Xue, "Treasure Night Soil as if It Were Gold": Economic and Ecological Links between Urban and Rural Areas in Late Imperial Jiangnan, *Late Imperial China*, xxvi, no. 1 (June 2005), 59. Chongqing's census completed on 13 November 1938 counted 496,798 people. Luo Zhuangu (ed.), 重庆抗战大事记 *Chongqing Kangzhan dashiji* [Grand Record of Chongqing's War of Resistance] (Chongqing, 1995), 30.

<sup>53</sup> CBPH Work Report, Sept. 1940–Feb. 1941, CMA, 66-1-3, 213; CBPH Work Report, Jan.–June 1940, CMA, 66-1-3.

was not popular. By 1943, health officials were receiving multiple complaints about accumulated excrement gushing out of public toilets and into the streets.<sup>54</sup> By 1948, even people employed by the CBPH simply dumped the toilets' contents into the nearest gutter or well, rather than cart the load away. Residents noticed and copied this technique, dumping their chamber pots directly into the wells. Police officers blamed the problem on their charges' lassitude (偷懶 *toulan*).<sup>55</sup> A historian's hindsight suggests that health officials succeeded not in cleaning up the city, but rather in replacing a functional (albeit corrupt) system with a dysfunctional one and severing the city's symbiotic relationship with its surrounding farm fields. Once night-soil porters refused to resume their work, and quite likely bullied anyone who attempted to edge in on the job, who would dare to touch human waste? Everyone in this struggle lost. Night-soil porters lost their jobs, the headmen their profit, municipal health workers their sanity, Nationalist authorities their respectability and residents of Chongqing whatever measure of cleanliness a functioning night-soil economy had previously afforded.

Their ability to frustrate the state's plans indicate that Chongqing's night-soil porters had ties to a criminal underbelly and used violence to achieve their goals. As their counterparts had done in Tokyo in 1930, they moved first through official channels and sent a petition to superior authorities (this had been the Imperial Diet in the case of Japan) to defend their 'established rights'. When this skilful appeal fell on deaf ears, just as that of their Japanese counterparts had done, they resorted to the familiar tactic of street violence to defend those rights.<sup>56</sup> Ultimately, Chongqing's petitioners knew the language of violence and intimidation best, and this thwarted Chiang Kai-shek's modernization schemes. The shit hegemons had not yet met their match.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Report and Correspondence, April–May 1943, CMA, 66-1-63.

<sup>55</sup> 關於調查楊國盛傾倒糞便於井裡情形的簽呈，公函 *Guanyu diaocha Yang Guosheng qingdao fenbian yu jingli qingxing de qiancheng, gonghan* [Report on Investigating the Situation of Yang Guosheng Dumping Excrement into the Drinking Well, with Official Correspondence], 25 June 1948, CMA, 61-15-4994. This type of disposal also occurred in Shanghai; Lu, *Beyond the Neon Lights*, 372 n. 8.

<sup>56</sup> Kreitman, 'Attacked by Excrement', 349.

## III

HANKOU 1951

For all its beauty in calligraphy and composition, the Chongqing petition might have had little historic meaning. It became a dead letter in the Nationalist bureaucracy, one that I encountered in the archive through serendipitous accident. True, it assumes vibrant colours when read in tandem with contemporaneous records that reveal just how powerful its creators were. They strategically removed the porters' labour and drowned the nation's capital in its own waste. The story is compellingly dramatic. But the facts that, in cities across China, gangs controlled the lucrative night-soil trade and that porters frequently used petitions, strikes and violence to defend themselves make Chongqing's tragicomedy seem worthy of little remark, just another example of a long-standing pattern.<sup>57</sup>

It is therefore surprising that when Communist officials made the same move in nearby Hankou (now Wuhan) just eleven years later, an entirely different drama ensued. Where the Nationalists had failed to oust the guild leaders and gain unfettered access to the porters' labour, the Communists succeeded. Close analysis of these two stories that unfolded in similar river-port cities relatively close in space and time, one under the control of an authoritarian republic and the other a single-party socialist state, illustrates the importance of political ideology to effective social change and puts the differences between the two states in stark relief.

According to local newspaper reports in Hankou — a bustling entrepôt five-hundred miles downriver from Chongqing — in the summer of 1951 the city's night-soil porters participated in a massive political theatre orchestrated by the local Communist government. Throughout the entire month of August, the porters 'struggled against the feudal gangmaster Wu Zhuqing' (吳竹青). Known as the 'night-soil commander' (*fēnbian sīlìng* 糞便司令), Wu reportedly controlled his minions through 'ruthless regulations' that reduced them to 'tearful poverty'. Under direction of the cadres, the porters ensnared Wu's top gang leaders, brothers Famu and Fajin of the Xia family, in

<sup>57</sup> Shanghai: Gross, *Farewell to the God of Plague*, 197. Tianjin: Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity*, 213–16. Hong Kong: Chong, 'A Night Soil Collection Point', 107.

December. In the obligatory parlance of the day, reporters referred to the Xia brothers as ‘feudal remnant reckless rogues’ and the twenty-three other headmen whom the porters identified as ‘feudal remnant overseers’.<sup>58</sup>

During the many struggle sessions that ensued, Communist officials learned that the overlords had abused and terrorized both farmers and porters, the latter in part by making them use extremely large buckets for their routes such that a single shoulder-pole load weighed eighty kilos. On one occasion, porter Chen Fanglao 陳方佬 carried such a load and it reportedly exhausted him to death. In another egregious instance in 1943, Xia Famu beat a porter bloody because he suspected she had taken her burden from the Xia family toilet. The beaten porter, who shared her story, went on record with her full name, Li Piaowa 李飄娃.<sup>59</sup>

With the guidance and protection of the party, Hankou’s night-soil porters established a new management organ, the Second District Night Soil Disposal and Sale Agency, elected two of their own as its first co-directors and organized themselves — 137 men and 243 women — into gender-exclusive work teams with defined territories throughout the city. The *Hankou Dagangbao* article cited above claimed these changes would nearly double porters’ income. The reporters asserted, ‘The workers are all extremely happy and they all say, “Not only have we freed ourselves politically, we have also freed ourselves economically since the government has increased our pay, and our lives will get better each day”’.<sup>60</sup> At a December gathering to celebrate the creation of the new agency, associate director Shu Dating 舒大廷 reportedly said, ‘Now we are truly masters of

<sup>58</sup> Song Binxian *et al.*, 鬥倒封建頭佬自己管理業務，二區糞便工人成立糞便清銷辦事處，武昌糞便工人鬥倒封建殘餘分子夏家【二虎】‘Doudao fengjian toulao ziji guanli yewu, erqu fenbian gongren chengli Fenbian qingxiao banshichu, Wuchang fenbian gongren doudao fengjian canyu fenzi Xiajia [erhu]’ [Denouncing the Feudal Overlords’ Personal Industry, Night Soil Workers from District 2 Established the Night Soil Disposal and Sale Agency, Wuchang Night Soil Workers Denounced the Feudal Remnant Reckless Rogues of the Xia Family], *Hankou Dagangbao* (19 December 1951).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> 工人們都非常高興，都說“我們不但在政治上翻了身，在經濟上也翻了身，政府把我們的力資提高了，我們的生活要一天比一天過得更好了。‘Gongrenmen dou feichang gaoping, doushuo “women budan zai zhengzhi shang fanleshen, zai jingjishang ye fanleshen, zhengfu ba women de lizi tigaole, women de shenghuo yao yitian bi yitian guode genghaole”’.*Ibid.*

our own destiny. From now on we will indeed have the attitude of a master while we enhance our work, improve the city's environmental hygiene, supply nearby farmers with processed fertilizer, and work hard to build our country'.<sup>61</sup>

These specific utterances may seem preposterous, but they reflect a crucial aspect of the Hankou affair that distinguished it from the Chongqing fiasco. Nationalist officials so stubbornly relied on militant policing and ruthless employment of force that when people resisted such measures, they ineptly responded with more of the same. Their tactical repertoire, characterized by endless regulations and punishment for transgressions thereof, expressed a politics of compulsory reform. Their inability to adopt the perspective of the oppressed and see them as agents, rather than as passive targets, was a primary reason for their failure in Chongqing.<sup>62</sup> Communist cadres, on the other hand, had an invaluable political tool: an ideology of liberation for the global proletariat. This allowed them to operate from the standpoint of the porters, rather than their overlords, as they broke the Hankou gang. The cadres' ability to sympathize gave the porters a sense of being listened to, which in turn allowed them to trust party cadres to protect them as they bravely denounced the men who for years had used violence and intimidation to exploit them.

If the politics of class liberation was the tool for the job, struggle sessions were the primary technique. Struggle sessions (批鬥大會 *pidou dahui*) were public gatherings at which a large group of people levied vociferous accusations against an individual or small group targeted for attack. They were brutal events that extracted confessions from their targets through a cunning use of public humiliation, manipulation, intimidation and sometimes outright violence. The attackers 'pointed accusing fingers, screamed, and wept', while the accused hung their heads.<sup>63</sup> This was known as 'speaking bitterness' (訴苦 *suku*), and it often took significant

<sup>61</sup> 我們現在是真正當家作主了，以後我們一定要拿出主人翁的態度來，提高業務，改進城市環境衛生，充分供應郊區農村生產的肥料，為建設祖國而努力。'Women xianzai shi zhenzheng dangjiazuo zhu le, yihou women yiding yao nachu zhurenweng de taidu lai, tigao yewu, gajin chengshi huanjing weisheng, chongfen gongying jiaoku nongcun shengchan de feiliao, wei jianshe zuguo er nuli.' *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Barnes, *Intimate Communities*, 21–51.

<sup>63</sup> Chen Yung-fa, *Making Revolution: The Communist Movement in Eastern and Central China, 1937–1945* (Berkeley, 1986), 186.



coaxing to get the accusers' tongues wagging. With the explicit goal of changing not just how people behaved but also how they *thought* — changing the political consciousness of the working classes — the Communists employed struggle sessions as 'part of a conscious strategy of political and psychological re-engineering'. They 'encouraged — indeed demanded — public expressions of anger, fear, and shame'. In cities, struggle sessions had a wide variety of targets and 'were stage-managed entirely by party cadres'. This allowed party cadres to provoke intense emotional responses in the people. One propaganda worker noted that 'speaking bitterness was extremely effective in stimulating class hatreds and heightened feelings of vengeance'.<sup>64</sup>

The primary goal was to compel the previously disenfranchised poor to participate in sociopolitical transformation by turning against the 'feudal' past, a process called 翻身 *fanshen*, or 'turning the body'. To publicly denounce one's oppressors and enter one's name into the public record as having done so constituted a full revolution, an open revolt against the old society and its leaders with no fear of reprisal. By doing just this, Li Piaowa signalled her faith in the Communist Party to protect her and secure her future. This was no hollow move in 1951, when the rifles of the raging civil war had only recently cooled on the mainland and were still running hot in the Taiwan Straits. People around the country had witnessed the horrifying repercussions of the return of the old guard after a period of Communist activism — turncoats buried alive; houses burned to the ground. At one of the struggle sessions a worker reportedly said: 'The past was your universe, but now Chairman Mao is leading us in freeing ourselves (*fanle shen*), and we will no longer accept your exploitation and abuse'.<sup>65</sup>

One need not wholly believe this journalistic hyperbole to know that what occurred in Hankou was indeed revolutionary.

<sup>64</sup> Elizabeth J. Perry, 'Moving the Masses: Emotion Work in the Chinese Revolution', *Mobilization*, vii, no. 2 (2002), esp. 112, 113, 115, 116–17, 122; Felix Wemheuer, *A Social History of Maoist China: Conflict and Change, 1949–1976* (New York, 2019), 65.

<sup>65</sup> 過去是你們的天下，現在毛主席領導我們翻了身，我們再不由你們剝削由你們打罵了。'Guoqu shi nimen de tianxia, xianzai Mao zhuxi lingdao women fanleshen, women zai bu you nimen boxue you nimen dama le'. Song *et al.*, 'Doudao fengjian toulao'.

Such overdetermined political rhetoric and public theatrics fuelled the revolution; indeed, they *were* the revolution for many. They guaranteed a new social order. Large public gatherings and newspaper reportage publicly identified the night-soil headmen as ‘enemies of the people’, targeted for abuse. The porters’ participation in these events and entry into the public record as victims of the ‘feudal remnant reckless rogues’ manoeuvred them out of their old position of exploitation into a new one of vulnerability: the state was their sole protection now. To escape their previous oppressors, the porters had to cast their lot in with the People’s Republic. This, if nothing else, fostered a desire to make it as strong a state as possible.

Herein lies a crucial difference between Chongqing and Hankou. Nationalist officials ignored the fact that guild leaders not only exploited the porters but also protected them. The officials offered no counter-protection to shield porters from the wrath of their overlords if these porters were to transfer their labour to another. Unable or unwilling to comprehend that asking porters to switch their allegiances threatened their safety and security, Nationalist statesmen merely attributed the porters’ reluctance to do so to stubbornness or wilful ignorance. On 25 March, CBPH director Mei Yilin questioned Mayor Wu Guozhen’s order to ‘privilege force’ (以奪為要 *yi duo weiyao*) and reported that since none of the headmen would talk with him, he had ‘no means of compelling them to accept’ (無從予以收容 *wucong yuyi shourong*) government control. He understood the absurdity of his own predicament but he failed to understand that of the night-soil porters, whom he claimed were ‘sticking to their old ways and being deliberately manipulative’ (扭於積習, 蓄意操縱 *niuyu jixi, xuyi caozong*).<sup>66</sup> Following direction from his superiors to coerce rather than entice or assist, Mei could think of no other way to approach the problem. He just bore down harder. He did not cleverly manipulate the porters, as the Communists would later do. Instead, he and his colleagues became targets of the headmen’s manipulation.

<sup>66</sup> 重慶市政府公報 *Chongqing shizhengfu gongbao* [Chongqing Municipal Government Bulletin], 1940, vols. 6–7, 104–5.

What occurred in Hankou in 1951 bears important lessons for our understanding of the history of night soil. Enacting hygienic modernity — the pursuit of a minority of elite individuals that necessarily pitted power-seeking people against each other — required cunning manipulation. State officials could only seize the night-soil industry and cut out the headmen if they protected workers from their former abusers while persuading them to transfer their allegiances to the state. In this, Communist cadres proved especially skilful.

#### IV CONCLUSION

Although applying night soil to farmlands sustained productive harvests for centuries, Chinese toilets and night-soil collection processes required significant changes to diminish the burden of faecal-borne diseases. These diseases are notoriously difficult to control; changing toilet habits has proved to be so challenging that even the well-funded and decades-long campaign against schistosomiasis succeeded because of treatment, not prevention.<sup>67</sup> A concatenation of forces converged to push Chinese cities away from night soil in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In Beijing, vacuum-pump sanitation trucks, chemical fertilizers and the household-responsibility system converged in the mid-1980s to sever the metabolic symbiosis between city and countryside. This triggered the ecological problems that still plague China, and the world, today.<sup>68</sup>

Modern sanitation and flush toilets have saved us from many threats to our health but have introduced a new one. Instead of carefully husbanding our urine and excrement as valuable nutrient inputs for our soils, we place them in water, polluting another precious resource. Urine generally accounts for less than 1 per cent of municipal waste water but contributes over 50 per cent of phosphorus and 80 per cent of nitrogen loading.<sup>69</sup> Meanwhile, many scientists conclude we are facing a global shortage of

<sup>67</sup> Gross, *Farewell to the God of Plague*.

<sup>68</sup> Goldstein, *Remains of the Everyday*, 87–8.

<sup>69</sup> Stephanie K. L. Ishii and Treavor H. Boyer, 'Life Cycle Comparison of Centralized Wastewater Treatment and Urine Source Separation with Struvite Precipitation: Focus on Urine Nutrient Management', *Water Research*, lxxix, no. 1 (Aug. 2015): 89.

phosphorus, and mining it causes extensive ecological damage.<sup>70</sup> Using a readily available — and renewable! — source would mitigate both problems. We could extract as much as 22 per cent of global phosphorus demand from human urine and faeces.<sup>71</sup>

The challenges associated with this are not technological. In England dry privies were designed and patented contemporaneously with the first flushing models and enjoyed considerable popularity from their first appearance in 1860 through the 1880s.<sup>72</sup> Today there are myriad models of tremendous utility. To cite just one innovation, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's Reinvent the Toilet Challenge launched in 2011, the energy-neutral Anaerobic Digestion Pasteurization Latrine (ADPL), field-tested in Kenya, creates its own biogas, uses that to pasteurize its contents and produces a fertilizer with no detectable faecal coliform.<sup>73</sup> Unfortunately, no one has conceived of the revolutionized toilet as a product that is equally suited to countries *with* comprehensive sewer systems. Rather than treat flushless toilets as yet another 'answer' from the Global North to a 'problem' of the Global South, we could rethink the logic of toilet systems worldwide.

Maintaining high-water-use toilets in industrialized countries with intensive consumption patterns threatens global fresh-water supply. Toilet users in the USA flush the most water by far, but China suffers a dire shortage of fresh water that even the monumental South to North Water Diversion (SNWD) project cannot alleviate. Plans to divert the headwaters of the Brahmaputra from the Himalayas into

<sup>70</sup> Christine Alewell *et al.*, 'Global Phosphorus Shortage Will Be Aggravated by Soil Erosion', *Nature Communications*, xi, no. 4546 (2020). The Pacific Island of Nauru has been nearly destroyed by phosphate mining. Peter Dauvergne, *Environmentalism of the Rich* (Cambridge, MA, 2016).

<sup>71</sup> Andre M. K. Mbaya, Ji Dai and Guang-Hao Chen, 'Potential Benefits and Environmental Life Cycle Assessment of Equipping Buildings in Dense Cities for Struvite Production from Source-Separated Human Urine', *Journal of Cleaner Production*, cxliii (2017); James R. Mihelcic, Lauren M. Fry and Ryan Shaw, 'Global Potential of Phosphorus Recovery from Human Urine and Feces', *Chemosphere* lxxxiv (2011).

<sup>72</sup> David J. Eveleigh, *Privies and Water Closets* (Oxford, 2008), 19–25.

<sup>73</sup> Aaron A. Forbis-Stokes *et al.*, 'On-Site Fecal Sludge Treatment with the Anaerobic Digestion Pasteurization Latrine', *Environmental Engineering Science*, xxxiii, no. 11 (2016).

China would affect nearly three billion people in fourteen countries across Asia.<sup>74</sup>

Perhaps the most formidable obstacle is precisely what the 1940 petition pinpointed: divergent definitions of disgust. While those who attempted to reform Chongqing's night-soil industry were disgusted by excrement and the people who worked with it, the petitioners expressed a profound disgust with the conniving and thieving tactics of state representatives who aimed to seize everything they had worked so hard to build. Disgust is not just discursive; it is also social. It shapes human relationships, the physical spaces we move in and how our cities are built. It motivates public health campaigns and salubrious goals to fight disease and improve people's lives.<sup>75</sup> Modernity inaugurated an obsession with sanitized spaces, the maintenance of which necessitates an entire network of care. People who perform this labour of care must sully their physical and social bodies — their skins and identities — to do a job to which we grant little value, though it sustains our lives. One heartrending example is the caste of manual scavengers in India, who labour in appalling conditions. Zygmunt Bauman calls this social underclass the true 'human waste' of modern society. What we call human waste (night soil) is actually a precious and valuable resource; the real 'human waste' is the 'wasted lives' of millions of social outcasts. This is so because 'modernity is a civilization of excess, redundancy, waste, and waste disposal'.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>74</sup> On US water use, see Morna E. Gregory and Sian James, *Toilets of the World* (New York, 2006), 16. On SNWD in China: Jon Barnett *et al.*, 'Transfer Project Cannot Meet China's Needs', *Nature* dxxvii (19 Nov. 2015). On Himalayan headwaters, Miguel Angel Medina-Abellan, 'La hidropolítica y las relaciones exteriores de China en el complejo hídrico del Himalaya; los casos de Nepal e India' [Hydropolitics and China's External Relations in the Himalayas: The Cases of Nepal and India], *Relaciones Internacionales-Madrid* 45 (Jan. 2020); Srikanth Kondapalli, 'The Indus Basin: The Potential for Basin-Wide Management between China and its Himalayan Neighbours India and Pakistan', in Zafar Adeel and Robert G. Wirsing (eds.), *Imagining Indus: Overcoming Water Insecurity in the Indus Basin* (Cham, 2017).

<sup>75</sup> Alexandra Brewis and Amber Wutich, *Lazy, Crazy, and Disgusting: Stigma and the Undoing of Global Health* (Baltimore, MD, 2019).

<sup>76</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), quote on 97. Bauman uses the metaphor of waste disposal, esp. pp. 58–61, 96–7. On waste work as care, see Joshua O. Reno, *Waste Away: Working and Living with a North American Landfill* (Oakland, 2016), esp. 14. On India, see Bhasha Singh, *Unseen: The Truth about India's Manual Scavengers*, trans. Reenu Talwar (New Delhi, 2014).

Given that night soil's twin transmissions — disease and stigma — taint the body in problematic ways, regaining its ecological benefits while avoiding its faults poses a formidable challenge. Philosopher Slavoj Žižek posits that attitudes towards excrement reveal nothing less than a society's fundamental ideology.<sup>77</sup> The addiction to pushing our waste 'away' limits what is possible, because 'building a better bathroom means approaching fundamental human disgusts and anxieties'. In other words, 'to process urine and shit intelligently, in both ecological and social terms, [it] ... will need to be *tended*'.<sup>78</sup> To create a more just society and care for our planet, we must resist the pull to push our waste 'away' and in fact draw it *closer*. This includes granting those who work with waste precisely what the Chongqing petitioners demanded: respect, dignity and self-determination.

Contemporary China offers a window into how difficult this is to achieve. Today's version of night-soil porters — urban plastic and cardboard recyclers — are still subject to a discrimination that decades of Communist institutions have not dispelled, the glowing story of Hankou notwithstanding. Joshua Goldstein argues that waste workers live on the edge of respectability and are routinely denied full citizenship in the world's largest Communist state. This is so in part because, although 'during the Mao era, the CCP's history of the night soil trade spoke with the voice of the aggrieved', the policies of that era locked waste workers into a hereditary, low-tier labour status. Night-soil porters were either children of the same, or orphans. State policy 'enchained them to their personal family histories' to keep costs low in a system reliant on human labour.<sup>79</sup> The consequences of loosening the grip on waste workers are unsavoury. Wartime Chongqing displayed that lesson in vivid colour.

Another problem, ignorance about the history of night soil, leaves us floundering in the face of ecological challenges and illustrates the value historical perspectives can bring to

<sup>77</sup> Slavoj Žižek, in Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright (eds.), *The Žižek Reader* (Oxford, 1999), 90–1. Žižek's toilet hermeneutics uses German, French and Anglo-American cultures as examples.

<sup>78</sup> Harvey Molotch, 'On Not Making History: What NYU Did with the Toilet and What it Means for the World', in Harvey Molotch and Laura Norén (eds.), *Toilet: Public Restrooms and the Politics of Sharing* (New York, 2010), 255, 269. Emphasis in original. Also see Reno, *Waste Away*, 8–14.

<sup>79</sup> Goldstein, *Remains of the Everyday*, 42, 85.

contemporary problems. Scientists globally are exploring ways to improve our soils, decrease nutrient pollution, reduce nitrogen waste, improve sanitation and carefully husband potable water.<sup>80</sup> Historical analysis and awareness of the knowledge that human communities had in centuries past are largely absent from this literature. Much of the research focuses on China due to the severity of its ecological problems, but these studies fail to recognize China's own abundant history of nutrient recycling. A study on Xiamen on the southern coast claims that 'it is still a relatively new concept to consider cities as a coupled human and natural ecosystem', despite the fact that all Chinese cities functioned in precisely this way until recently.<sup>81</sup> Scholarship on urban metabolism, which 'considers a city as a system with flows of energy and material between it and the environment', remains ignorant of how millions of people across China put it into practice for a millennium.<sup>82</sup>

To address our ecological fragility, we must think flexibly about how to handle human waste. Historical inquiry can inform our adaptations. Sewer systems created cities in which 'most of the nutrients entering the urban ecosystem are wasted'.<sup>83</sup> Yet by the tenth century, farmers in China had devised a nutrient recycling system that supported productive farms and clean cities. As early as 1275, Chinese people employed 'urban metabolism' to build what was then the world's most populous and densely inhabited city, with more than a million inhabitants: Hangzhou, capital of the Southern Song

<sup>80</sup> Shenghui Cui *et al.*, 'Changing Urban Phosphorus Metabolism: Evidence from Longyan City, China', *Science of the Total Environment*, dxxxxvi, no. 1 (Dec. 2015), 924–32; Stefan Diener *et al.*, 'A Value Proposition: Resource Recovery from Faecal Sludge — Can it Be the Driver for Improved Sanitation?' *Resources, Conservation and Recycling*, lxxxviii (2014); Stanley B. Grant *et al.*, 'Taking the "Waste" Out of "Wastewater" for Human Water Security and Ecosystem Sustainability', *Science*, cccxxxvii, no. 6095 (10 Aug. 2012); Meagan E. Schipanski and Elena M. Barrett, 'The Influence of Agricultural Trade and Livestock Production on the Global Phosphorus Cycle', *Ecosystems*, xv, no. 2 (March 2012), 256–68. See also journals such as *Chemosphere*, *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *Journal of Environmental Management*, *Plant and Soil* and *Waste Management and Research*.

<sup>81</sup> Tao Lin *et al.*, 'Managing Urban Nutrient Biogeochemistry for Sustainable Urbanization', *Environmental Pollution*, cxcii (2014), 246.

<sup>82</sup> Nektarios Chrysoulakis *et al.*, 'Sustainable Urban Metabolism as a Link between Bio-Physical Sciences and Urban Planning: The BRIDGE Project', *Landscape and Urban Planning*, cxii (2013), 100.

<sup>83</sup> Lin *et al.*, 'Managing Urban Nutrient Biogeochemistry', 246.

dynasty (1127–1276 CE).<sup>84</sup> We have the potential to employ current knowledge not to move away from night soil altogether, but rather to incapacitate all disease microbes therein, return its nutrients to our soils, preserve potable water *and* value the people who do this work.

Scholarship in critical discard studies offers ways to think through these kinds of problems, which undermine social justice and damage our planet. It interrogates attitudes towards and behaviours around rubbish to reveal the yawning chasm between the opposing mentalities that underlie waste management.<sup>85</sup> Whether the battle is between government officials obsessed with urban aesthetics and night-soil porters who profit from shit; or public health enthusiasts bent on sanitation and farmers friendly to dirt; or aficionados of plumbing and champions of dry-composting toilets, the gap between world views can seem insurmountable. Historians can help untangle the attachments that keep us chained to an ugly present and an uglier future.

This vast universe holds a single planet capable of hosting us, and it is struggling to bear our weight. As we consider the options for preserving our home, we must seek wisdom wherever possible. Historians can look for what we have lost in the past, and ought to dig deeper still when those things are misconstrued as never having been worthy of keeping. Bringing to light the perspectives of those who valued what hygienic modernity destroyed might proffer something to soothe that aching longing of the human condition: ‘the constant gnawing sense of having had, and lost, some infinite thing’.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Jacques Gernet, *Daily Life in China on the Eve of the Mongol Invasion, 1250–1276*, trans. H. M. Wright (Stanford, 1962), 27–8.

<sup>85</sup> See the Discard Studies blog at <<https://discardstudies.com/>> (accessed 13 Dec. 2021).

<sup>86</sup> David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (New York, 2009), 123.



## APPENDIX

CHONGQING FERTILIZER INDUSTRY TRADE  
UNION PETITION, MARCH 1940

We are reporting an unlawful seizure of our profession, which has severed us from our livelihood, and request your assistance in putting a stern stop to this affair. We have records that all toilets on all streets and alleys in both the municipal and surrounding areas of Chongqing pertain to our private industry, [the rights to] which we either own through inheritance, or purchased with money, or pay for through land rent; in each case we have written contracts to prove this. All excrement and urine inside the toilets is to be transported by us on shoulder pole, per our private industry, and sold to farmers. In the past our group was called Wuhua, now we are named the Fertilizer Industry Trade Union. The Party and Government have a file on this that can be verified.

We are mostly exceptionally poor, lonely widows who hire porters to carry the loads, while the rest of us do the bitter labour ourselves so as to make a living. All of the toilets belong to our private industry, which like other people's fields, land and real estate is protected by law. Others have no right to encroach upon and seize it. We have undergone training with the Public Security Bureau several times, and like police officers at all times and places we urge people to pay close attention to cleanliness and hygiene, and we have done nothing against the law, but the traitor Liu Mingcheng (劉明誠), who coveted control of the waste company for the sake of control alone, deceived the Public Security Bureau and hatched a sly plan to take illegal possession of our private latrine industry and use our good reputation for his personal gain.

Since the emergence of this case with Mingcheng we have carried on as usual, carting away the waste from all of our privately owned toilets. Moreover, local ruffians have deceitfully seized the industry, encouraged by the Bureau of Public Health's Sanitation Brigade and relying on the power of the officials to assist with the usurpation of our private trade. None of these latrines was ever taken into state possession, [or] drawn into its boundaries and appraised . . . but officials [abused their] power to forcefully sell our private industry and have taken the

profit of each toilet's excretal contents for their own benefit, harming our group of over twenty thousand strong who are now cast to the winds with no employment, our livelihood cut off.

We are thus forced to prepare this petition in which we lay out, item by item, both sides of the story and accuse the [Chongqing] municipal government of failing to correct the Bureau of Public Health by forcing them to author a directive mandating that within one week, all toilets must be reallocated to the night-soil porters, and [the usurpers] handed over to the officials who shall overcome resistance and undertake the management [of this matter].

Just as with privately held plots of land, the law does not allow toilets in our privately held industry to be commandeered. Like grain in the farmers' fields, the law does not allow the usurpation of the excrement and urine that they contain. Currently the Bureau of Public Health Sanitation Brigade relies upon the power of the officials to steal the latrines of the people's private commerce, selling night soil like profiteers, breaking off we destitute and humble souls from our livelihoods. We know only this trade of latrines. . . . The common right to land within the Three Principles of the People takes as its postulate that when people have fields to plough they have food to eat, and in all cases runs counter to an official's expropriation of private property to cultivate and harvest it [and therefore profit therefrom].

One might tell us to change professions, but may we ask, if our fields and property are confiscated, and we do not have even an inch of land, nor any education, how are we to earn a living? How are we to withstand this [usurpation of our property] and the [Sanitation] Brigade's plans to profit from the seizure that harms the livelihoods of over twenty thousand people and treats us with utter disregard? If one says that chamber pots and night-soil buckets are unattractive, then one can make the people improve them without resorting to illegal usurpation.

We should make use of waste products and increase their usefulness for the nation. Consider for example that in opening up new lands to cultivation in the treasured lands of Sichuan's border regions we transform the periphery into gold. Why illegally appropriate people's private latrines and sell the night soil as a

profiteer? [This makes us] the laughing stock of powerful nations, and it will hurt our national prestige.

In sum, there is no legal rationale for seizing our private latrine industry, and the Sanitation Brigade's and officials' appropriation of our private trade is both illegal and contrary to the [Three People's] Principles. If these officials and the Sanitation Brigade are not sternly forced to desist from seizing our private industry and harming our livelihood, we shall die without peace [,] with a grudge in our hearts.

Board of Directors of the Chongqing Municipal Fertilizer Industry Trade Union:

Liu Yingzhou  
 Hu Qingyun  
 Yang Shuqing  
 Wang Fushun  
 Lan Fangcheng  
 Cao Peiji  
 Yin Shaoqing  
 Huang Yucheng  
 Tang Qingyun  
 Li Yunqing  
 Duan Yinqing  
 Li Ziyun  
 Nie Senshan  
 Yuan Jinshan  
 Li Shaopei

[Signed with chops]

## ABSTRACT

In March 1940, leaders of the Chongqing night-soil trade union sent a petition to the governor of China's Sichuan province to contest health officials' attempts to seize the night-soil industry. Cleanliness in Chongqing, the national capital during the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–45), held profound significance for China's hygienic modernity, but Nationalist authorities failed to ensure it. On their part, the petitioners failed to recognize the centrality of odour in health officials' agenda. These joint failures left the wartime capital mired in muck. This article employs microhistorical analysis of the 1940 petition to highlight a significant shift in olfactory sensibility. Comparison with a similar instance in nearby Hankou eleven years later, when Communist cadres succeeded in breaking the local night-soil gang, elucidates key distinctions between the Nationalist and Communist states. The conclusion considers what might be possible if we imagine using night soil to fertilize soils not as an anti-modern practice but as a sustainable means of processing waste and caring for our planet. To regain a portion of night soil's many values, we must conquer the obstacles of disease transmission and disgust. The former is a technical problem for which solutions already exist; the latter is a formidable social problem.