

PROFILE

Xiao Liangyu
China

Rubbish Man

Recycling the detritus of success, a Chinese peasant rides the urban dream

By Lijia MacLeod

Collecting reeee-jects!" Xiao Liangyu sings out as he rides his cart across Beijing's Qinghua University. "Any old books, newspapers for sale? Bottles, cardboard?" The melody changes every few houses. "Rubbish Man!" When business calls, he jams his foot on the front wheel of his tricycle-cum-warehouse—the brakes are long gone—and settles down for the haggle with a broad smile.

With his average build and thin moustache no-one gives him a second glance. After all, these days rubbish men are everywhere, clad in dirty outfits, their dusty faces and wild hair completing the country-bumpkin look. Yet back in his impoverished home village this Everyman of the new Chinese revolution enjoys hero status for breaking out of rural poverty and into a new life in the capital, with the relative affluence it has brought him.

The business of refuse collection—finding or buying old or discarded household items and buying up empty bottles and cans for resale at recycling centres on the edge of town—has been snapped up by the hungry migrants while their urban cousins refuse to stoop to doing the city's dirty work. In fact so many like Xiao are vying for trash in the university precinct, officials had to split them into two groups, working alternate days.

Xiao's far-away family home is Xiaocun, set deep in northern Anhui in China's hinterland, a beautiful place encircled by rivers and hills. But life is hard in the large agricultural province and scraping a living growing rice, cotton and rape, the Xiao family constantly battled just to keep their bellies full.

"When I was 18, I saw no future in tilling the land," he says. "It's just damn hard sweat and there's no money in it. You sell the grain for a small profit, but then the fertilizers are more expensive, taxes are higher, and 'voluntary work' is ordered for countless excuses. Worst of

all, you sometimes get a piece of paper for your grain, an I.O.U., just a promise of money instead of cash."

Nine years ago, as Xiao returned home from a distant hillside beneath a heavy load of firewood, he took the decision that would change his life: "I will go to the city to work. Why should I suffer here?"

One more peasant in an army of 70 million migrants, Xiao made first for neighbouring Henan to work in construction. The work was no easier than farming, but the pay was much better. Once he saved enough, he returned home for Chinese New Year in 1992 to marry his childhood friend Fang Cuihang.

But again he was too restless to stay in the village. A brother-in-law suggested he try his luck in Beijing and the newly-weds left for a new life. Before long, Xiao learned of a lucrative line of business—rubbish.

‘I'll do my best so that my son can find a decent job’

With help from Anhui friends, Xiao secured a desirable position as a rubbish man in Qinghua University's residential area. Now 27, he settled in Anhui village, a ghetto near the university where 2,000 or so people live crammed together in rented houses and Cuihang left her part-time job as a maid to look after their fat-cheeked baby boy. Their tiny, single room has newspaper for wall paper, but a small stove keeps it warm, and the black and white television (a good buy on his rubbish round) draws a steady stream of neighbours and relatives.

Now the sole breadwinner, he works even days around Qinghua's relatively prosperous residents. At the end of a competitive day's bargaining, he pedals his purchases home, and goes through them



like a soldier counting his war trophies. On odd days, he loads his cart with cardboard boxes, mountains of white polystyrene and colourful cans and bottles, to sell at a recycling centre. He has to play the game within the rules—working out of turn or beyond the residential area could mean a fine or confiscation of his cart.

The locals look down on him but Xiao's recycling nets profits of up to 1,500 yuan (\$180) per month, about two to three times the average urban worker's salary. Volume is paramount: he buys plastic bottles for 5 fen and sells for 7.5 fen, and aluminium cans enjoy a 5-10 fen profit margin, but larger finds like stoves can sell for a 50% mark-up. Rent costs 200 yuan a month and a few hundred is sent back to ageing parents, but Xiao saves the rest for their son. As soon as the baby can walk, he will go to kindergarten. "I'll do my best to give him a good education so he can find a decent job," says the rubbish man. "If you have money and education, who dares to look down on you?"

As he weaves his tricycle laden with booty along the capital's ever busier avenues, Xiao dreams of driving a Liberation model truck, his hands gripping the wheel in clean white gloves. "One of my friends has promised me a job as a truck driver if I get a licence. I've asked around, it costs over 10,000 to get one but I'll try. A driver's salary is only about 800 yuan a month, but a truck driver sounds much better than a rubbish man!"

Lijia MacLeod is a freelance writer based in Beijing.

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