

Winners of the Ashby prizes

EPA: *Economy and Space*
2023, Vol. 55(8) 1833–1837
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DOI: 10.1177/0308518X231197967
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The editors of *EPA: Economy and Space* are delighted to announce that the Ashby prizes for the most innovative papers published in the journal in the calendar year 2022 were awarded to **Kun Wang** (Guangdong Academy of Sciences), **Junxi Qian** (University of Hong Kong) and **Shenjing He** (University of Hong Kong) for their paper ‘Global destruction networks and hybrid e-waste economies: Practices and embeddedness in Guiyu, China’ and to **Andrea Ricci** (University of Urbino) for his paper ‘Global locational inequality: Assessing unequal exchange effects’.

The papers have been made free to access for 1 year.

Kun Wang, Junxi Qian and Shenjing He



We are profoundly humbled and pleasantly surprised to be awarded the esteemed Ashby Prize. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the editors of *EPA: Economy and Space* for recognising our work. After a relatively tortuous process to get this work polished and published, the manuscript found its home at *EPA: Economy and Space*. We hope that this achievement will fuel our academic growth and inspire scholars from China and other Global South contexts to dialogue with and indeed redefine cutting-edge theoretical debates with the fascinating empirical materials that are unique and valuable.

In a way that mirrors the cultural influences permeating the circular economies examined in our paper is also encoded by the hope to problematise and enrich mainstream theoretical debates from our positionalities embedded in the Chinese context. The journey of the research project, which eventually culminated in the *EPA: Economy and Space* publication, commenced with exploring the corpus of Global Production Networks (GPNs) literature. Despite our appreciation of the works, we gradually discerned that the GPNs framework inadequately addressed the nuances of e-waste recycling economies in local contexts. Specifically, it fails to account for the multiplicity of

economic activities in the ‘post-consumption’ segment, in particular the rapid expansion and quick economic returns in this segment, despite of the absence of global lead firms. Notably, the recycling economies in Southern countries are often orchestrated by small illicit family workshops, exemplifying globally connected networks that are created from the grassroots level.

Our intellectual journey then led us to Global Destruction Networks (GDNs), a concept introduced by Herod et al. (2014) in their critique of Lepawsky and Mather’s (2011) work on the ‘ongoingness of economic life’. Taking a cue from their idea of the W-NP-W (‘waste-new product-waste’) circuit, we began to make sense of the intersections between GPNs and GDNs. Deriving from the Marxist conception of value as congealed labour, they posit that labour is a pivotal determinant of the geography and organisational structure of GDNs. However, their Marxian conceptualisation of value obscures the variegated, culturally embedded processes of work and labour. This was where we set out to intervene. Guided by the ‘practice turn’ in economic geography, we sought to systematically elaborate on a practice-oriented conception of embeddedness, thus developing a cultural economic geography approach to trace the material circulations and spatial articulations between GPNs and GDNs.

Concurrently, we are engaging with a vast array of waste studies in geography and cognate disciplines. We classify the extant e-waste geographical studies germane to our paper into three strands and critically engage with them throughout this meandering journey of researching GDNs in Guiyu: The first, championed by scholars such as Josh Lepawsky, Tong Xin and others, critically examines the global mobilities and flows of e-waste, critiquing prevailing e-waste policy and regulatory frameworks. The second endeavours to ‘unbracket’ the GPNs to inaugurate inquiries into post-consumption economic practices. This includes contributions from scholars such as Andrew Herod, Graham Pickren, Nicky Gregson and Andrew Brooks, among others. The third trajectory ventures into political economies, political ecologies, environmental politics and global environmental injustices of e-waste. Notable contributors to this discourse include Mary Lawhon, Anna Lora-Wainwright, Yvan Schulz, Graham Pickren, Carlo Inverardi-Ferri and others. After a comprehensive review of these studies, we realised that the foundational processes that birthed the global e-waste recycling hubs remain inadequately elucidated and that a cultural economic geography approach can continue to unravel the making and evolution of waste processing hubs in the Global South, which are more or less epistemological ‘black boxes’ for the mainstream societies in the West. Notably, a handful of studies on waste hubs have documented the territorial agglomerative dynamics of recycling clusters. Nonetheless, they primarily concentrate on the economic transactions and shared characteristics of e-waste hubs, as exemplified by Davis et al. (2019), while the distinctive socio-cultural fabrics that bridge local and global dimensions, or that intertwine GPNs and GDNs, remain uncharted territories to a significant extent.

We concede that market dynamics are dominant in economic relations, transactions and dependencies, particularly under the neoliberal trend. This, however, does not necessitate a ‘cultural demise’. Cultural forces remain pervasive and influential in contemporary economic geographies, necessitating a meticulous analysis of how seemingly ‘elusive’ cultural elements shape entrenched economic practices and landscapes. In the formative stage of this research, Kun Wang embarked on a study of how lineage organisations in Guiyu facilitated the formation of GDNs. As a fledgling PhD candidate, he once withdrew from this research due to two primary obstacles: the Chinese state’s heavy-handed crackdown on e-waste workshops during his fieldwork, which significantly impeded access to the case study, and the explicit dismissal by locals who unequivocally rejected the idea of lineage organisations’ involvement in recycling – for them, it was pure ‘business’. However, following a period of reflection, he re-engaged with the fieldwork. The subsequent insight gained was a cautionary reminder that a researcher should not unreflectively accept respondents’ narratives. Upon further investigation, it was discovered that although the lineage organisations, as institutional entities, did not participate in recycling, a host of intangible, locally-specific cultural elements such as identities, values, traditions, overseas migration history and social norms

based on lineage cultures were undeniably interwoven into the GDNs coordinated by Guiyu. As articulated by one of our respondents, ‘the business mode taking place between two individuals from Chaoshan [the broader cultural region to which Guiyu is affiliated] simply diverges from those between people from other places’.

By disentangling the cultural-economic nexuses of waste recycling, we embrace a relational and processual approach to transcend the entrenched dichotomies such as legal/illegal, formal/informal, economic/cultural, global/local. In tracing the kaleidoscopic connections, circulations and exchanges between ‘formal’ GPNs and ‘informal’ GDNs, mediated by meanings, values, identities and social practices, this paper substantiates Inverardi-Ferri’s (2021) argument, that the cultural economy and political economy paradigms should be viewed as complementary, rather than mutually exclusive, in the study of informal, grassroots and often illicit economic practices.

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Andrea Ricci



I am truly honoured to receive the Ashby Prize and very grateful to the editors of *EPA: Economy and Space*, not just for personal gratification, but because it draws attention to the issue of unequal exchange. This occasion gives me the opportunity to reflect on the development of my research. The winning paper is part of a project I started several years ago on how unequal exchange in international trade affects global economic development gaps and global social inequalities (Ricci, 2019, 2021a, 2021b). My research moved in three directions: the establishment of a coherent theoretical framework, the definition of the empirical methodology and finally the data analysis. Only in the final presentation do these steps unfold sequentially, whereas in research they are intertwined in continuous mental feedback.

The concept of unequal exchange was first introduced in the middle of the last century by Raul Prebisch and Hans Singer to describe the deterioration in the terms of trade of developing countries exporting raw materials to the benefit of developed industrial countries. It later became a recurring theme in world-systems analysis and dependency theory with Immanuel Wallerstein and Andre Gunder Frank, and in Marxist imperialism theory with Arghiri Emmanuel and Samir Amin. In the 1970s and 1980s, it was the subject of extensive academic and political debate for two main reasons. Unequal exchange challenges one of the most enduring and accepted dogmas in economics, that of the mutual benefits of free trade and international specialisation based on comparative advantage. It also implies a perverse transfer of economic resources from the Periphery to the Centre, leading to the reproduction of underdevelopment.

In the following decades, the issue of unequal exchange was relegated to the margins. The neoliberal restoration contributed to this. But the shortcomings of the theory itself also had a strong influence. Theoretically, unequal exchange was ultimately derived from exogenous political and institutional factors leading to monopolistic distortions, rather than as the normal outcome of a competitive world market. Moreover, the dichotomy between poor extractive and rich manufacturing economies no longer corresponded to the new international division of labour (NIDL) that was emerging with global value chains and production networks (GVC/GPN), characterised by the rapid industrialisation of key peripheral regions. Methodologically, no way could be found to compare labour inputs across different levels of national productivity using only market prices and wages and gross final exports. Subsequent improvements in the reliability of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) statistics allowed for new measures of unequal exchange based on real exchange rate misalignments between countries, known in the literature as the ‘Penn effect’ (Köhler, 1998). However, these attempts were dismissed as mere empirical exercises in the absence of a coherent theoretical framework.

So, the starting point of my research was to ask what could theoretically justify the systematic real currency undervaluation of developing countries. The traditional neoclassical explanation, based on the ‘Balassa-Samuelson effect’, is contradicted by a large body of empirical research. I found an answer in the international law of value, as it can be reconstructed from the few hints Marx left, according to which different national labour productivity determines a different value of money between countries, even in free competition. The resulting global currency pyramid gives rise to transfers of value through international trade, allowing a geographical separation between value produced and value captured on the global market. Then, by measuring labour productivity in PPPs, I arrived at a method of homogenising labour input internationally. There remained the question of how to take NIDL and GVC/GPN into account. The recent availability of world input-output tables and value-added trade data enabled me to overcome this problem. I had thus established a coherent theoretical and methodological framework for the empirical analysis of unequal exchange, incorporating both real and monetary variables to explain asymmetries in international trade. As is always the case with research, in retrospect the path seems straight and smooth. In reality, it was tortuous and full of obstacles, with long detours and sudden advances.

The *EPA: Economy and Space* article applies this framework to the world income distribution between countries, examining a set of global inequality indicators to assess the impact of unequal exchange on the ‘locational premium’ (Milanović, 2015). The results show that in the age of globalisation (1995–2019), value transfers implicit in international trade have played an important role in widening the opportunity gap between citizens of rich and poor countries. Relative outflows are greater for the poor Periphery, especially in Southeast Asia and Africa, than for the emerging Periphery, driven by China. Within the Centre, European countries are the main beneficiaries. This picture suggests some policy implications. The epochal phenomenon of mass migration is largely determined by the locational advantage enjoyed by citizens of rich countries in terms of better life opportunities. Asymmetries in international trade resulting from unequal exchange are partly responsible for this. The simultaneous pursuit of restrictive migration policies and trade liberalisation only exacerbates the global social crisis in order to maximise the gains of the more developed countries. In the long run, this contradictory policy mix is doomed to failure. Either ensuring adequate and regular migration flows or introducing restrictions on free trade in favour of the poorest countries to promote global income redistribution would be wiser and improve global welfare. A mix of both policies, agreed and managed multilaterally at the international level, would be even better.

In conclusion, the theoretical and methodological framework adopted can be used to investigate a wide range of issues, including global environmental inequalities (Ricci, 2023). My hope is that, with the support of this prize, it will provide new research insights into the role of unequal exchange in the reproduction of uneven spatial development.

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