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# Implications of the Waste Ban for international circular economy

Lessons from the China-EU circular economy cooperation

## RESULTS IN BRIEF

China and the European Union signed the **first international circular economy (CE) agreement** shortly after China issued the 'Waste Ban' on the import of 24 categories of solid waste. As CE's principle of 'waste-to-value' (re)cast the global waste trade into the environmental spotlight, **how does the Waste Ban impact international CE development?** This study finds that **Waste Ban narratives demonstrate a political gridlock** in China-EU CE coordination.

By focusing on Waste Ban narratives and perceptions of agency in the China-EU cooperation, this discourse analysis finds that the main waste ban narratives diverge on:

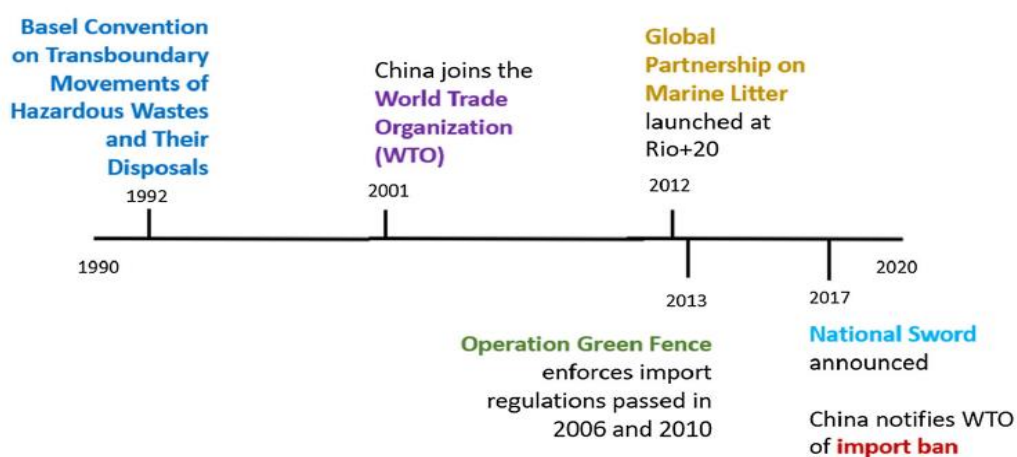
- ▶ different roles and rules of CE cooperation,
- ▶ different scales of implementation and;
- ▶ different assessment criteria for environmentally sustainable and socially just CE(s).

**3 critical reflection & negotiation points could enable fruitful CE cooperation:**

- overcome 'student-teacher' roles rooted in linear development that counter CE
- focus on local waste prevention instead of international/national waste diversion,
- evaluate both the benefits and impediments of (new) trade relations for a CE cooperation that contributes to environmental and social sustainability.



## GLOBAL WASTE REGIME



**Fig. 1:** Political institutions in the evolution of the global waste trade

China's announcement of the Waste Ban (WB) at the World Trade Organization (WTO) followed its tightening of domestic waste import controls as well as increasing visibility of global marine litter discourse.

The WTO along with the 1992 Basel Convention on Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposals were pivotal institutions that facilitated and shaped the origins of the global waste regime (Fig. 1).

In this regime, China had been the **single largest waste importer** while the EU-28 was collectively the **largest waste exporter**.

In the context of the China-EU CE cooperation, which coincides with the timeframe of the WB, Chinese and EU agents employed various discursive strategies to justify and rationalize their perceptions and reactions towards the WB. A key strategy is the creation of narratives to strengthen the reception of their perspectives.

## THREE WASTE BAN (WB) NARRATIVES

### 1. WB as constructive disruption in global CE



In this first narrative, the WB disrupts contaminated and hazardous wastes from entering China, inspires other waste importing countries to follow suit, and **spearheads a regime-change in the global waste trade**.

Chinese agents who reproduce this narrative argue that China is no longer in the development phase where it needs to tolerate illegal dumping activities and 'pay the (environmental and economic) price' of waste processing for other countries to obtain scrap.

Instead, agents argue, after years of playing the role of the "student" and learning from the regulations of "teachers" such as the EU, China is ready to be a rule-setter in the waste regime.

### 2. WB as destructive disruption in global CE



A second narrative stresses that the EU's supply of scrap remains important for China and that environmental problems of the global waste trade **should be addressed but not through a hard instrument such as a unilateral ban**, which goes against global free-trade.

This counter-narrative is most prominently reproduced within the EU Commission, recycling organizations in the EU, and echoed by Chinese recycling organizations and agents from trade-oriented international organizations.



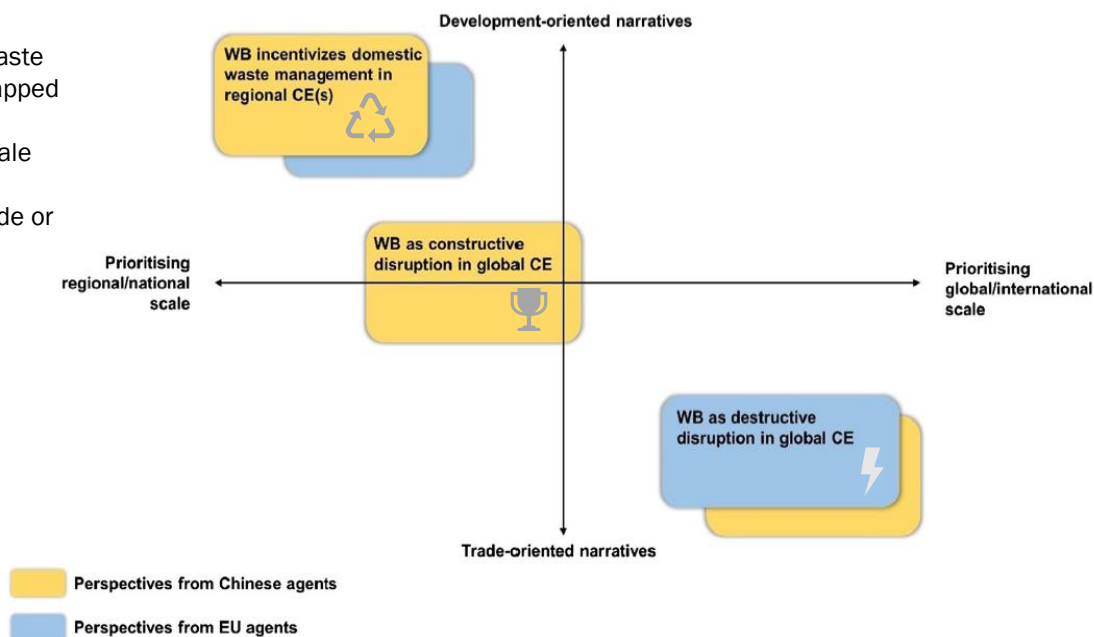
### 3. WB incentivizes domestic waste management in regional CE



For Chinese agents, this narrative emphasizes the WB's **termination of foreign supply** for the Chinese recycling industry, which incentivizes formal and centralized recycling systems and supports existing national waste management initiatives such as Zero-Waste cities.




Agents representing EU perspectives in this narrative stress that the Waste Ban complements the EU's CE strategy by **cutting off the possibility of shipping wastes** to China. It problematizes limited domestic waste recycling capacities within the EU, citing the historical dependence on waste exports as a cause.

**Figure 2:** Three Waste Ban narratives mapped according to their prioritization of scale and orientation towards either trade or development.






## TAKE AWAYS FOR DECISION-MAKERS

The WB narratives show bleak prospects of international CE development through China-EU cooperation due to divergent:

-  perceptions on roles & rules of cooperation
-  prioritization of scales for CE implementation
-  assessment criteria for an environmentally sustainable & socially just CE

To bypass this gridlock, we recommend decision-makers from China and the EU to reflect and negotiate on how to:

-  overcome 'student-teacher' roles rooted in linear development that counter CE
-  focus on local waste prevention instead of international/national waste diversion
-  evaluate benefits & impediments of (new) trade relations

## HOW DO WE KNOW?

This analysis uses **empirical evidence** from 72 interviews with key stakeholders, 52 policy documents and participant observations at international CE events between November 2017 and June 2019.

In particular, the study is based on a **novel discourse analysis approach** (Leipold and Winkel 2017), which focuses on who created the narrative, as well as how and why they did so.



## FURTHER INFORMATION & SOURCES

Full research article:

**“Explanations of the political gridlock behind international circular economy: Waste Ban narratives in the China-EU cooperation” (2022)** by A. Luo, F. Rodríguez, S. Leipold. Access here: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-022-01758-4>

Discourse and agency:

Leipold, S. and Winkel, G., 2017. Discursive agency: (re-)conceptualizing actors and practices in the analysis of discursive policymaking. *Policy Studies Journal*, 45 (3), 510–534. doi:10.1111/psj.12172

**This brief can be cited as:** Luo, A & Kopp, M. (2022). Implications of the Waste Ban for international circular economy. *Circular Economy Series*, 9.

*The Circular Economy Series presents research results of the research group “Circulus - Opportunities and challenges of transition to a sustainable circular bio-economy”. The researchers are developing a comprehensive understanding of possible pathways to a circular economy in Germany and Europe. To this end, they combine perspectives from the social, environmental and engineering sciences to analyze the ecological and socio-economic consequences of the circular economy in various sectors.*

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