Scrap Sociality: Making the City Livable Through Making and Trading Scrap in Urban China

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Proliferating waste matter in Kunming, China has helped fuel lively informal scrap trades through which low-income urban inhabitants with diverse backgrounds forge new relations. Despite facing harassment by the authorities, migrant scrap traders have carved out what they call a “relatively free” realm of living that offers potential upward mobility without sacrificing obligations of care. Through an ethnographic treatment of scrap trading, I show that the making of scrap as excess matter of value in Kunming is contingent on historically-informed habits of attentively caring for objects, propensities to ignore and subvert property norms, and desires for engaging in an alternative form of urban sociality. I propose the term “scrap sociality” to capture how this form of value-making (1) helps make the city livable for the less privileged, and (2) is productive for capital, serving to reorient excess matter toward renewed commodity form futures.

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