

One man's trash is another man's treasure

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AMERICAN journalist Adam Minter's idea of junk is a whole lot different from yours.

To you, it might be what your mother threatens you'll be collecting if you don't study hard enough. Or the stuff you throw out in your annual Chinese New Year spring-cleaning effort. But to Minter, all that trash can account for billions of dollars and even boost a country's economy.

"I don't know about you, but I've never seen trash worth US\$100,000," says the 43-year-old who has spent most of his life studying and reporting on the global recycling industry.

The trash he refers to is what rubbish collection companies in America gather and sell to scrap yards in China for them to recycle. Minter estimates that one container of copper scrap, for example, can easily demand between US\$60,000 and US\$120,000.

"The bottomline is: scrap goes to where the manufacturers are. So it is interesting just how strong a magnet China is when it comes



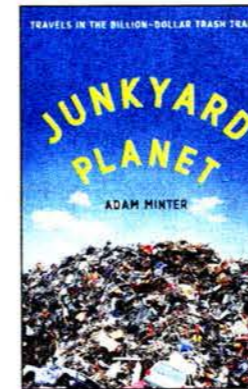
Minter: *'We all think of recycling as a green activity. We do it because it is the right thing to do. But for people in the business, it has nothing to do with being green. It's about the raw materials.'*

to scrap. It is such a big manufacturer that it can pay more for it than say, somebody in Malaysia, even though it's generated in Malaysia. Even Singapore is a big exporter of scrap to China," he says.

"It just goes to show how strong China's economy is and how it's built on recycling content... If the Chinese economy

couldn't import scrap metal and scrap paper, it would really be in trouble. Because in some cases, almost half of China's supply of raw materials comes from scrap."

Minter has recently consolidated his findings and published them in a book titled *Junkyard Planet*, which he hopes will help



Minter will also be making an appearance at the Singapore Management University (SMU) next Wednesday to talk about the book and his experience reporting on the US\$500 billion junkyard industry.

As part of his job, Minter has travelled to well over 150 scrap yards in at least 20 different countries over the last decade, and that is not including the ones he visited as a kid growing up in a family that also worked in the recycling industry. Along the way he has witnessed people who have made themselves a fortune working in the business, and finds it especially amazing that

debunk the myths that most people believe about the recycling industry. The book is available in most leading bookstores here.

manual labourers who work in Chinese scrap yards often earn almost twice what a college graduate working in the scrap yard's offices would make.

"We all think of recycling as a green activity. We do it because it is the right thing to do. But for people in the business, it has nothing to do with being green. Ultimately, they are in the same business as someone who owns an iron ore mine.

In the end, what makes the business successful is not good feelings, it's profit. Good feelings and intentions don't turn old cola cans into new ones. Profit does. Nobody digs through another person's trash just because it's a good deed," he adds.

Adam Minter will be speaking at the SMU's Li Ka Shing Library Meeting Room at 2pm on Feb 12.

*Please log on to www.smu.edu.sg for more information or to register to attend the event. His book, *Junkyard Planet*, is available at Popular and Kinokuniya at \$35.95 before GST.*