

Takeaways from AP’s report on how China’s textile recycling efforts take a back seat to fast fashion

By Tian Macleod Ji
The Associated Press

WENZHOU, China — China is the world’s largest textile producer and consumer, throwing away 26 million tons of clothes each year, mostly made of unrecyclable synthetics.

A recycling factory in Zhejiang province on China’s east coast repurposes discarded cotton clothes to try to deal with the urgent waste problem. So, too, are young innovative designers in Shanghai, by remaking old garments into new ones or creating clothing out of waste items such as plastic bottles, fishing nets, flour sacks, and even pineapple leaves.

But these efforts are dwarfed by giant fast-fashion brands churning out cheap synthetic garments for a consumer base spreading rapidly across the world. Experts believe real change is only possible through an elusive zero-waste workflow or Chinese government intervention.

Here are key takeaways from AP’s report:

Cotton is recycled in China, not fast-fashion synthetics

At the Wenzhou Tiancheng Textile Company, mounds of discarded cotton clothing, loosely separated into dark and light colors, pile up on a workroom floor. Jacket sleeves, collars, and brand labels protrude from the stacks as workers feed the garments into shredding machines.

It’s the first stage of a new life for the textiles at one of the largest cotton recycling plants in China.

But factories like this one are barely making a dent in a country whose clothing industry is dominated by “fast fashion” — cheap clothes made from synthetics, not cotton. Produced from petrochemicals that contribute to climate change as well as air and water pollution, synthetics account for 70% of domestic clothing sales in China.

Textile waste is an urgent global problem, with only 12% recycled worldwide, according to fashion sustainability nonprofit Ellen MacArthur Foundation. Even less — only 1% — are castoff clothes recycled into new garments. In China, only about 20% of textiles are recycled, according to the Chinese government — and almost all of that is cotton.

To achieve a game-changing impact, what fashion expert Shaway Yeh calls “circular sustainability” is needed among major Chinese clothing brands so waste is avoided entirely.

“You need to start it from recyclable fibers and then all these waste textiles will be put into use again,” she said.

Chinese cotton carries the taint of forced labor

Chinese cotton has a taint of its own, said Claudia Bennett of the nonprofit Human Rights Foundation. Much of it comes from forced labor in Xinjiang province by the country’s ethnic Uyghur minority.

“One-in-five cotton garments globally is linked to Uyghur forced labor,” Bennett said.

In May, the U.S. blocked imports from 26 Chinese cotton traders to avoid goods made with Uyghur forced labor. But because the supply chain is



DAUNTING TASK. A worker feeds discarded textiles into a shredding machine at the Wenzhou Tiancheng Textile Company, one of China’s largest cotton recycling plants in Wenzhou, in eastern China’s Zhejiang province, in this March 20, 2024 file photo. The recycling factory that repurposes discarded cotton clothes is trying to deal with the urgent waste problem. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan, File)

so sketchy, Uyghur cotton is used in garments produced in countries that don’t bear the “made-in-China” label, Bennett said.

“Many, many, many clothing brands are linked to Uyghur forced labor through the cotton,” she said. They “hide behind the lack of transparency in the supply chain.”

Fast-fashion brands score low on sustainability

According to a report from independent fashion watchdog Remake, assessing major clothing companies on their environmental, human rights, and equitability practices, there’s little accountability among the most well-known brands.

The group gave Shein, whose online marketplace groups about 6,000 Chinese clothing factories under its label, just 6 out of a possible 150 points. Chinese fast-fashion e-commerce juggernaut Temu scored zero.

Also getting zero were U.S. label SKIMS, co-founded by Kim Kardashian, and low-price brand Fashion Nova. U.S. retailer Everlane was the highest scorer at 40 points, with only half for sustainability practices.

China’s domestic policy doesn’t help

Cotton recycled from used clothing is banned from being used to make new garments inside China. This rule was initially aimed at stamping out fly-by-night Chinese operations recycling contaminated material.

But now it means the huge spools of tightly woven rope-like cotton yarn produced at the Wenzhou Tiancheng factory from used clothing can only be sold for export, mostly to Europe.

Making matters worse, many Chinese consumers are unwilling to buy used items, something the Wenzhou factory sales director, Kowen Tang, attributes to increasing household incomes.

“They want to buy new clothes, the new stuff,” he said.

Young Chinese designers create sustainable fashions

Among younger Chinese, a growing awareness of sustainability has contributed to the emergence of fledgling “remade” clothing businesses.

Thirty-year-old designer Da Bao founded Times Remake in 2019, a Shanghai-based brand that takes secondhand clothes to create funky

new fashions.

The venture, which began with Da Bao posting one-off designs online, now has a flagship store in Shanghai that stocks remade garments alongside vintage items.

The designs are “a combination of the past style and current fashion aesthetic to create something unique,” Bao said.

Zhang Na has a fashion label, Reclothing Bank, that sells clothes, bags, and other accessories made from waste materials such as plastic bottles, fishing nets, and flour sacks.

The items’ labels have QR codes showing their composition, how they were made, and the provenance of the materials. Zhang draws on well-established production methods, including textile fibers made from pineapple leaf, a centuries-old tradition originating in the Philippines.

“We can basically develop thousands of new fabrics and new materials,” she said.

What is the future?

Recycled garments have a much higher price tag than fast-fashion brands due to their costly production methods.

And that’s the problem, said Sheng Lu, professor of fashion and apparel studies at the University of Delaware.

“Studies repeatedly show consumers are not willing to pay higher for clothing made from recycled materials, and instead they actually expect a lower price because they see such clothing as made of secondhand stuff,” he said.

With higher costs in acquiring, sorting, and processing used garments, he doesn’t see sustainable fashion succeeding on a wide scale in China, where clothes are so cheap to make.

“Companies do not have the financial incentive,” he said. For real change, there needs to be “more clear signals from the very top,” he added, referring to government targets like the ones that propelled China’s electric vehicle industry.

At least for now, “fast fashion definitely is not out of fashion” in China, Lu said.

Associated Press writer Isabella O’Malley in Philadelphia contributed to this report. The Associated Press’ climate and environmental coverage receives financial support from multiple private foundations. AP is solely responsible for content.



BABY ON BOARD. Diluwara Begum, a midwife, top photo, holds up a newborn baby after helping in her delivery last month on a boat under a tarp, bottom photo, on the River Brahmaputra in the northeastern Indian state of Assam. (AP Photos/Anupam Nath)

Indian mother delivers baby on boat as her river island is inundated by floodwaters

By Anupam Nath
The Associated Press

MORIGAON, India — A blue tarp covered a mother and her newborn daughter from the incessant rain on their boat journey. Jahanara Khatoon, 25, had just given birth on the boat on their way to a healthcare center, surrounded by the raging floodwaters of the Brahmaputra River.

“I am very happy,” said her husband, Kamaluddin, who was also on the boat. “My wife wanted a boy, but Allah has given me a girl and I’m very satisfied. I don’t want to have any more children.”

The couple had left their home on Phuliamari Char, one of the islands in the river, after it was inundated by floodwaters, taking shelter on a nearby island known as Chars.

Increased rainfall in the region blamed on climate change has made the Brahmaputra River — already known for its powerful, unpredictable flow — even more dangerous for those who live near it or on the more than 2,000 islands in it.

India, and Assam state in particular, is seen as one of the world’s most vulnerable regions to climate change because of increasingly intense rain and floods, according to a 2021 report by the Council on Energy, Environment, and Water, a New Delhi-based climate think tank.

Khatoon and Kamaluddin earn their living as farmers on their island in Assam state’s Morigaon district.

A medical team was visiting flooded Chars to aid those who needed medical help, especially pregnant women. The team convinced Khatoon to travel with them to the nearest medical facility across the river.

The baby couldn’t wait for Khatoon to get to the healthcare center. As her labor progressed, the team on the boat quickly got to work, holding up a tarp to protect them from the rain as they helped with the delivery.

Within 10 minutes, the baby emerged to shouts of celebration.

Diluwara Begum, an auxiliary nurse and midwife, lifted the newborn and whispered prayers into her ears.

“This was my first time helping deliver a baby on a boat. It was a very different feeling. It feels good,” she said.

The family has named the baby Karima, which means “Giving.”

