

*China Blue*. Produced and directed by Micha X. Peled. Associate produced by Song Chen. Teddy Bear Films and the Independent Television Service, 2005, 88 minutes.

A co-production of Teddy Bear Films and the Independent Television Service, *China Blue* is a fitting counterpart to producer/director Micha Peled's previous outing, *Store Wars: When Wal-Mart Comes to Town*. While the latter centers on a southern town's internal debate over the construction of a Wal-Mart mega-store, the former focuses our attention at the other end of the global economy, where the goods sold in Wal-Mart are actually produced. *China Blue* takes us inside a Chinese sweatshop – the Lifeng factory in south China – responsible for producing denim pants and other products for western consumption. At a time when many documentarians are working to educate audiences about the realities of neoliberal policies, *China Blue* takes a unique approach. This is so not only because it presents a clear, compelling illustration of the abhorrent working conditions faced by many (often underage) Chinese workers, but also because the film manages to foreground the workers' own perspectives and subjectivities. In this sense the film keeps us dramatically engaged with its specific narrative, while also underscoring the structural ties that bind these players together.

At the outset, viewers are introduced to three main characters, each of them workers at the Lifeng factory: Jasmine, Li Ping, and Orchid. Their initial embodiment of youthful exuberance is attenuated by onscreen titles identifying their roles in the workplace, titles such as "thread-cutter," "seamstress," and "zipper-installer." The film primarily organizes itself around the perspective of Jasmine, a sixteen-year-old Chinese girl who is compelled to leave the agrarian work of her family and instead find employment consistent with the so-called "New Era" of economic progress in China. Her perspective is conveyed through voiceover narration, which often presents excerpts from Jasmine's diary. Such narration usually accompanies observational footage of Jasmine traveling to the Lifeng factory as well as learning the ropes from more experienced workers. This approach underscores Jasmine's typicality as well as her uniqueness. She is clearly a participant in what the film identifies as the "largest pool of cheap labor" in human history, and yet by telling her story in her own words the film retains her voice, rendering harsh, potentially abstract economic realities in personal terms. In fact, Jasmine's own expressivity is brought to the fore throughout the film as the audience bears witness to her love of writing (an activity she describes as akin to "eating candy"). As we watch her learn the ins and outs of being a denim "thread-cutter," her writing increasingly serves as a means of escape and fantasy in an environment in which one's work life is all-consuming. At one point, while working a late shift, her voiceover narration notes that she relies on her imagination to get through the long hours, creating stories and characters which she will "write down" before going to sleep that night. One of her favorites – she notes – concerns a girl "who travels far, far away to train with a famous kung-fu master." In her story, the girl's "sacrifice" is ultimately "worth it" because it will "help her family."

In Jasmine's work life the story is different. Many of the injustices represented in the film include the lack of overtime compensation and a minimum wage as well

as the firing of pregnant workers. Particularly striking are the film's images of exhausted workers sleeping on piles and piles of jeans after enduring eighteen hour shifts (the film notes that – if caught – such workers will be fined). The boss of the Lifeng factory is Mr. Lam and his presentation throughout the film is relatively evenhanded, understanding his position as one that is both structurally and historically conditioned. In his introduction to the viewer, Mr. Lam traces his own personal roots back to the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping (“My life changed along with China,” he states). A former chief of police, Lam notes that he often begins his days by reviewing security camera footage of his workers – most of whom are women – punching in at the start of a shift (if a worker is late, she or he is fined by the minute). His initial claims about the egalitarian nature of his workplace are immediately undermined by his statement that his workers are “uneducated...low caliber” individuals who need to be kept “under control.” However, much of the film's pedagogical value rests on its presentation of Lam in relation to the multinational corporations that contract with him. In several scenes, the viewer is witness to Lam's meetings with corporate clients in which the downward pressure on wages is made tangible. Lam's subsequent decision to withhold his workers' wages (leading to a temporary work stoppage) is thus understood as not merely a commentary on his status as the film's “villain,” but – rather – as reflective of the broader neoliberal economic system in which he plays a small part.

The distributor of *China Blue* – Bullfrog Films – has also produced a study guide for the film, authored by sociologist Eli D. Friedman. Organized around five “themes” to frame discussion, the guide picks up on several aspects of the film and asks students to think critically about neoliberal globalization from a variety of different vantage points. The guide contextualizes various aspects of the film, such as rural to urban migration in China, life in sweatshops, and possible strategies for resistance. Students are further encouraged to think comparatively about how the representation of life in the Lifeng factory compares to life in an American workplace. The guide also underscores Mr. Lam's entrenchment in a global economic framework that includes multinational corporations who refuse to cover the costs of “social compliance.” Overall, Friedman's guide does an excellent job of foregrounding the systemic aspects of Peled's investigation.

For a western audience, one of the most profound moments in the film comes at the end when Jasmine confesses curiosity as to who wears the jeans that she and her co-workers produce. Do they realize how fortunate they are? She admits to a friend that she fantasizes about slipping a letter into the pocket of a pair of jeans, one that would share her experiences with the eventual consumer. The filmmakers complement a voiceover reading of this letter with images of the product being shipped from China to the United States, from its production to its consumption. This final sequence – like the film as a whole – is an effective illustration of neoliberal globalization, one that will force the viewer to ask hard questions about fair trade v. free trade and corporate social responsibility.

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