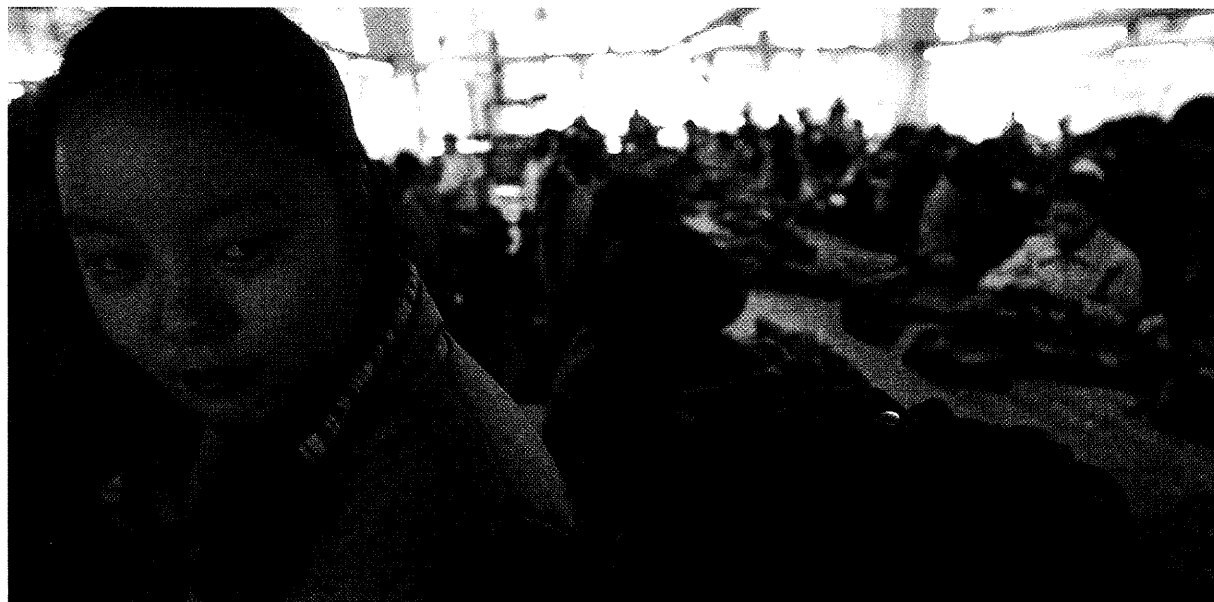


News and Reviews

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China Blue

■ Directed by Micha X. Peled. 88 minutes. 2005. In English and Chinese with English subtitles.

Review
Filmed under the radar of Chinese authorities, *China Blue* tells the story of young female workers assembling blue jeans in Lifeng Factory, located in Shaxi in Guangdong Province. Lifeng is owned by Mr. Lam, a former police chief of Shaxi, who provides Micah Peled, the film's producer, with virtually unlimited access to the factory staff and management. The bulk of the film comprises interviews with two workers in particular—Jasmine, a thread-cutter, and Orchid, a zipper-installer—and documents their working experiences in order to reveal the pressures, and at times abuses, endured by rural migrants whose cheap labor has fuelled China's meteoric economic growth of recent years.

There are a couple of ways to interpret *China Blue*. Most Americans viewing this film will likely see it just as the director hopes: as an example of the dark underbelly of globalization. Moreover, the abuses mentioned or depicted in *China Blue* will simply confirm, for many viewers, existing stereotypes of the tragic Chinese sweatshop worker.

An alternative way to interpret this film goes

against, or perhaps more accurately *beyond*, the depiction of passive Chinese peasants suffering under autocratic bosses. For example, a successful strike by disgruntled workers (over ongoing delays in receiving their wages) could, on the one hand, signal to viewers the high level of frustration endured by exploited factory workers. On the other hand, the strike could just as easily be seen as an example of not only individual perseverance in the face of constant surveillance and threats of dismissal, but also the resilience and agency of the stereotypically fragile and docile Asian female factory worker. Similarly, the human bonds and sympathy exhibited in the film between workers also serve to contradict the tragic undertone of the film, as established by the on-screen textual captions, scene sequencing, and background music used by Peled.

China Blue is a useful teaching tool on two levels. First, the film provides a springboard from which students can learn about the nature and implications of the enormous economic and social transformations occurring in contemporary China. Second, for more advanced courses, *China Blue*

raises many issues that go beyond the case study of Chinese factories. This second, deeper level of analysis scrutinizes the filmmaker and asks larger questions related to representation, development, and ethics.

China Blue does an excellent job of illustrating the "human face" of globalization, and specifically the often-concealed linkages between people at different ends of a commodity chain. It is easy, and of course morally convenient, to avoid giving any thought to where one's jeans are made, but *China Blue* forces viewers to come to terms with the condi-

tions under which their clothing is made. Teachers interested in discussing how commodity chains work in practice will make their task much easier, and more relevant to students, by showing *China Blue*. When we search the racks of Wal-Mart or Target for cheap blue jeans, what happens on the

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The Asian Educational Media Service (AEMS) is a program of the Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). Our mission is to help educators at all levels, from elementary through college, find multimedia resources for learning and teaching about Asia, to promote understanding of Asian peoples and cultures. Our free services include:

- *News and Reviews*, published three times a year;
- An online database of audiovisual materials;
- Reference service;
- Educator workshops on teaching with film;
- Lesson plans, streaming video, film recommendations and other web resources;
- A lending library for local educators

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Women in Asia

We open 2008 with an issue of the newsletter focused on women. Two films concern children in the workforce: Nick Kontogeorgopoulos explores the ambiguities in the lives of teenage girls working in a sweatshop, as depicted in *China Blue*, while Eric Edmonds provides us with detailed background information to place *Punam*—a film about a Nepalese girl—in the context of child labor in Nepal generally. In a very different environment, *Good For Her* also takes a look at challenges women face in the workplace—here, the perceived necessity for cosmetic surgery in South Korea.

We had a special opportunity in May here at the University of Illinois to view *Vagina Monologues: Stories from China*, presented by one of the film's directors, Sufeng Song. We were collectively struck by the film's intelligence and conviction, and so offer you a review, together with an interview with Professor Song, hoping to bring this film to a wider audience.

Finally, Leonard Schoppa reviews one film about a man: *Campaign*, a new Japanese documentary revealing the intricacies and the ironies of the local political process in suburban Japan.

New online reviews and current events pages

In December, we published our second website review (on the AEMS website, under the **Publications** tab): Catherine Benton evaluates "Virtual Village," an in-depth exploration of a North Indian village. In addition, we have added new current events pages (under the **Other Resources** tab), compilations of useful links for teaching about the recent uprising in Burma and about manufacturing issues in China. More online reviews are anticipated mid-winter; subscribe to our RSS feed to read them when they are published.

New DVD release—On Another Playground: Japanese Popular Culture in America

Japan's so-called "Soft Power"—the influence and spread of its popular culture throughout the globe—is the topic of three professionally filmed and richly illustrated public lectures on this new DVD from our own Media Production Group. At a conference hosted by the American Studies program at Doshisha University in Kyoto, Theodore Bestor of Harvard University discusses sushi, William Kelly of Yale University talks about baseball, and Christine Yano of the University of Hawai'i at Manoa explores the Hello Kitty phenomenon. The DVD will be available for purchase through the AEMS website.

Asian Film Festival 2007: Popular Southeast Asian Cinema

The fifth annual Asian Film Festival hosted by the University of Illinois's Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies and AEMS was a great success, with six films screened on November 9 and 10. We offered an educator workshop in conjunction with the festival addressing two topics: women and Islam in Indonesia, and how to teach about Cambodia's Khmer Rouge period. For more information, see our website, under the **Events** tab. Keep an eye out for online film reviews relating to this film festival in the coming months. Our 2008 film festival will focus on Japanese cinema. ■

—Tanya Lee, Editor

***Errata:** Please note that corrections to past issues of *News and Reviews* are now posted on our website under *Publications*.

China Blue

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other side of the world? We get the answer when we see Mr. Lam being squeezed by a British purchaser to lower his price and prepare a large shipment in a short time period. The boss then passes on the pressures he experiences to Jasmine, Orchid, and the other factory workers who must now work almost incessantly until the order is met.

China Blue opens up myriad possibilities to discuss China's economic reforms, rural-urban migration, the pressures facing Chinese peasants in the post-Deng Xiaoping era, the widening cultural gulf between urban and rural China, and the gender dimensions of industrialization. Most

obviously, the labor abuses associated with the early, rapid stages of industrialization are on full display in *China Blue*: workers are constantly fined for infraction of company rules, get only four hours of sleep (if any) on certain days, live twelve to a room, and have their first month's paycheck withheld as a "deposit" to discourage them from leaving. These are just a few of the many hardships depicted in the film.

As mentioned, the deeper level of analysis, and the one that lends itself to rich classroom discussion, involves probing into the film's blind spots. For example, Peled (perhaps deliberately) gives no suggestions of how to improve labor conditions in Chinese factories. International inspections and monitoring of factories are, for

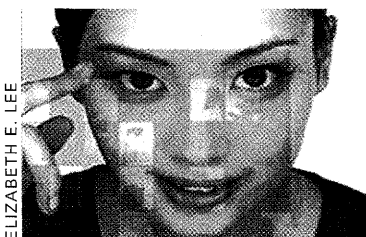
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Good for Her

■ Directed by Elizabeth E. Lee. 48 minutes. 2005. In English and Korean with English subtitles.

Good for Her explores the popular and controversial cosmetic surgery boom in South Korea, particularly the double eyelid procedure that makes eyes look bigger by creating an eyelid fold. Through a series of interviews with women, contemporary newsclips, media images, and personal narratives, filmmaker Elizabeth E. Lee attempts to understand not only why so many Korean women surgically alter their features, but why they seem to mold themselves to a uniform model of beauty.

Rather than fall into the trap of casting cosmetic surgery as an oppression of easily duped women, she does justice to the complexity of the issue by asking how power is involved in this quest for beauty. Cosmetic surgery began in South Korea in the 1950s during the Korean War. Its objective was to alter Korean faces to look more American. One of the first patients to undergo the procedure was a male Korean interpreter who believed that changing his eyes would improve his employment opportunities. More than fifty years later, *Good for Her* finds that the pressure to succeed in the workforce remains



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one of the most compelling reasons women go under the knife.

This documentary centers the concept of power—internal self-confidence and external economic power—showing that for some women, cosmetic surgery is considered a way to increase power and choice. It ends with a quote by Arundhati Roy, “A feminist is someone who negotiates herself into a place where she has choices,” leaving us with the suggestion that choosing cosmetic surgery can be a feminist act. But Lee complicates this argument throughout the documentary with critiques offered by academics and students about the nature of the social and labor systems within which these women are negotiating their positions. In this way, Lee keeps the viewers on their toes by subverting our

assumptions about women, cosmetic surgery, individual agency, and power.

Lee positions herself as an outsider who questions her own Western assumptions. An American

audience might find baffling the near absence of the issue of race, but in Korea, categories such as class, gender, and region are more important for determining social inclusion and exclusion. The elephant in the room may seem obvious to most Americans, but for most Koreans it is a non-issue, or a false reading of cosmetic eyelid surgery. This may provide an opportunity for students to question their own assumptions about, for example, what feminist power and liberation are, or what cosmetic surgery is about, and also about how race is deployed in different ways outside of the USA.

This film is a potentially versatile teaching tool and can lend itself well to a number of college-level classes, including courses in Gender Studies, Asian and Asian-American Studies, Ethnic Studies, Sociology, Anthropology, Media Studies, and Cultural Studies. The documentary can provoke broad questions about agency; women and labor; power and discipline; non-Western feminism; race and body; and more specific questions about Korea, cosmetic surgery, media and body images. ■

Taeyon Kim received her Ph.D. in American Culture Studies from Bowling Green State University. Her research was on cosmetic eyelid surgery among Korean and Korean American women.

HOW TO PURCHASE: *Good for Her* is available on DVD from Center for Asian American Media. Price is \$250 for purchase and \$55 for rental.

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Jasmine (in the blue jacket) works as a thread-cutter at Lifeng Factory in Guandong Province in China. The teenage female workers often get only a few hours sleep at night.

various reasons, effectively dismissed in *China Blue*, but what can American students do? Does watching documentaries like *China Blue* really change one's consumption patterns? Is boycotting Chinese goods really the way to effect positive

change? Such questions emerge from *China Blue*, making the film a great tool for sparking classroom discussion.

Finally, for those with the time to spare, it is recommended that after an initial discussion about the film, students also watch the twenty-minute “Q and A” with Peled, available in the Additional Features section of the DVD menu. After watching this segment, students will learn that Peled lied to Mr. Lam about the film's real purpose, and Peled admits that Lifeng was chosen only because it was the first (and only) factory that permitted access. Clandestine filmmaking has always been important in bringing injustices to light, yet the ethical implications of such strategies cannot be ignored.

China Blue is an important film that works on many levels as a teaching tool. Furthermore, unlike many other documentaries, *China Blue* is suitable for both the university and high school classroom; since the film's central characters are

teenagers, high school students can especially relate to the story and are likely to be captivated by the differences between their own lives and the difficult lives depicted in *China Blue*. Though not everybody will necessarily take away the director's intended message that Western consumers are the principal source of misery for passive, exploited sweatshop workers, the film offers many teaching avenues and students will certainly remember the film for its visual production values, its stories, and especially its characters. ■

Nick Kontogeorgopoulos is associate professor of International Political Economy and Asian Studies at the University of Puget Sound. His research interests include tourism geography, ecotourism, community-based development, and the political economy of Southeast Asia.

HOW TO PURCHASE: *China Blue* is available on DVD and VHS from Bullfrog Films. Price is \$295 for purchase and \$95 for rental.