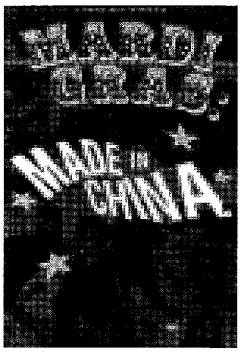
MEDIA RESOURCES



Two Steps Forward, One Step Backward: Representations of Chinese Factory Workers in *Mardi Gras: Made in China*

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Introduction

In an effort to illustrate the 'human face' of globalization, several filmmakers, journalists, and authors have attempted recently to depict the 'ordinary' lives of Chinese workers and peasants affected by the tremendous changes taking place in China since the 1980s. One such attempt is the film *Mardi Gras: Made in China*, released in 2005 by Carnivalesque Films.[1] *Mardi Gras: Made in China* was directed, produced, and edited by David Redmon, who spent two months with the employees and owner of Tai Kuen Bead Factory in the Fuzhou Special Economic Zone in Fujian Province of China. After being asked to leave the factory by Chinese government officials, Redmon then traveled to New Orleans, where he interviewed participants in the annual Mardi Gras Carnival celebration.

The shiny, colorful beads that have become synonymous with Mardi Gras provide the central thread, so to speak, of *Mardi Gras: Made in China*. In particular, Redmon examines how the production, distribution, and consumption of Mardi Gras beads reflect broader issues, including global trade patterns, class and gender inequality, and commodity fetishism. Because they are known to most Americans, particularly undergraduate students, beads represent an intriguing and particularly effective example of the ways in which commodity flows connect people across the world.

Two Steps Forward

Films carry great promise due to the power of visual images to elicit sympathy and build understanding, but films about contemporary China often give an overly broad, and ultimately faceless, look at the social, economic, and cultural changes taking place during the past few decades. By contrast, *Mardi Gras: Made in China* does nothing *but* give the individual, personal look at the impacts of globalization. Compared to other depictions of global trade and consumption, *Mardi Gras: Made in China* represents two steps forward in several ways.

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First, the film effectively illustrates to American students the ways in which they are connected to others through consumer goods. As mentioned, Mardi Gras beads are widely known in America, and Redmon makes good use of the contrast between where the beads are made and where they are consumed.

Second, the film does a good job of showing students the human face of globalization, where people's lives in one part of the world are greatly affected by the preferences, actions, and behaviors of people elsewhere. The film features numerous clips of the female factory workers interacting and socializing during their time off, thereby humanizing what may be in the minds of some students the faceless Asian sweatshop worker.

Third, it is easy to talk about global inequality and understand it in an abstract or statistical way, but what does it look like on a daily basis? *Mardi Gras: Made in China* gives students a glimpse into the everyday lives of Chinese factory workers and illustrates how material conditions, life options, aspirations, and worldviews differ greatly based on global hierarchies of wealth and power.

Finally, what the film does best is show how people at each end of a commodity chain know almost nothing about each other, thereby creating what Karl Marx labeled the fetishism of commodities. Throughout the film, Redmon asks Americans at Mardi Gras whether they know where their beads come from, and the respondents in most cases neither know nor care. One especially memorable response comes from an Indiana truck driver who responds to Redmon's question about where the beads come from by stating: "Don't know, don't care—they're beads for boobs, man."

At the other end of the commodity chain, the Chinese factory workers are shown pictures of partygoers at Mardi Gras and react with amazement and curiosity. After seeing pictures of Mardi Gras nudity, and being told that American women "take their clothes off for beads," the young female Chinese factory workers

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laugh in wonderment, with one asking "how is that possible?"

One Step Backward

Mardi Gras: Made in China is a great teaching tool, and students respond with enthusiasm, but I believe that the film also represents a step backwards in certain respects. There are three problems with the film, and all three relate to Orientalism, where Asians are depicted in essentialized, simplistic, or negative ways.

First, like virtually all films about globalization and global capitalism, *Mardi Gras: Made in China* offers a flat, one-dimensional view that demonizes capitalists and ignores the complex trade-offs inherent to the process of social and economic change. Rather than encouraging his viewers to see that the Chinese female factory workers enjoy benefits *and* suffer costs at the same time, Redmon instead tries throughout the film to show that the Chinese workers are victims with no choice or control over their own lives. Redmon denies agency to the Chinese workers by depicting them as trapped, exploited, and passive cogs in the global bead machine, even as there are several interviews in which the Chinese women make it clear that bead factory work provides some measure of freedom and social interaction among other young women. This relates very much to Orientalism because denying the Other agency and depicting the Other as passive and tragic is a key feature of Orientalism.

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Certainly, one of the strengths of *Mardi Gras: Made in China* is the lack of narration or editorial voice-over: the story of Mardi Gras beads is instead narrated by the subjects themselves in their own words during on-camera interviews. However, even when footage is depicted on the screen that contradicts this simplistic picture of the brutalized Chinese worker, Redmon uses on-screen text to intervene with a moral commentary on the evils of capitalism and the suffering caused by globalization.

For example, as one Mardi Gras participant is explaining how ten cents an hour in China may not be as bad as we think, due to the importance of assessing wages relatively rather than absolutely, "MBA Student, University of Florida" appears on the screen. This MBA student is the only American interviewed to have his occupation or demographic information flashed on the screen. In another example, a scene depicting Chinese workers laughing and joking around with one another in their room is interrupted, and contradicted in tone and mood, with on-screen text informing the viewer that "10 workers share five beds located in a 20 X 24 dorm room inside the factory compound."

The second problem with the film is that it undermines true understanding, even as it promotes a better understanding of the daily lives of Chinese factory workers. By the end of the film, it is obvious that Redmon's goal is to make those Americans interviewed for the film and those Americans who watch the film feel guilty for both their ignorance and for the exploitation of Chinese workers, as if wearing beads at Mardi Gras is the sole cause of misery among Chinese women slaving away in horrible factories.

Though he tries to educate people at both ends of the commodity chain, Redmon ultimately makes things worse by perpetuating stereotypes. In particular, Americans at Mardi Gras are shown footage of the stereotypical Chinese sweatshop slave bent over her machine doing dangerous work. At the same time, the Chinese workers are shown images of women exposing their breasts at Mardi Gras—these images simply reinforce stereotypes held among the Chinese workers of promiscuous American women. In the aforementioned scene where Chinese factory workers are shown pictures from Mardi Gras, one worker comments that "We Chinese are different from Americans in that respect. We are not used to things like that."

Finally, the film relies extensively on the perceived differences between Americans and Chinese, and this undermines whatever feelings of connectivity are fostered by the film. Just as Orientalism relies on binary divisions between Us and Them, and emphasizes difference rather than commonality, *Mardi Gras: Made in China* also relies on the trope of difference to make its point. Even the color tinting and the background music serve the purpose of reinforcing difference—music is always industrial and ominous when showing Chinese workers but all the footage from New Orleans is backed by upbeat jazz and Carnival music. The film especially emphasizes the differences between carefree, independent, irresponsible, and wasteful young American women versus burdened, passive, earnest, and dutiful young Chinese women.

Conclusion

Mardi Gras: Made in China represents two steps forward and only one step back because, despite the problems with the film outlined here, I will continue to use the film and anticipate that it will continue to be received favorably by my students. It is a very well-made film: it has won 18 film awards in the USA and beyond, and was nominated for Best Documentary at the Sundance film festival. It is also a memorable film for students, and is an effective example of interconnections between China and the USA. Lastly, even the problems with the film open up many excellent opportunities for classroom discussion on issues such as Orientalism, the benefits and inherent limitations of visual representations, and the need to view the impact of globalization and industrialization on 'ordinary' Chinese lives in a balanced and subtle manner.

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Endnote

[1]See the official website for *Mardi Gras: Made in China* for additional information about the film: http://www.mardigrasmadeinchina.com/.