

ESSAY THREE:

FROM THE FESTIVAL TO THE FACTORY

The majority of studies on globalization and commodity chains focus on how corporations disseminate and market commodities. But this focus ignores small entrepreneurial businesses that also produce and disseminate niche commodities. In between the apparel (Nike, Gap, Guess), fast-food industry (McDonalds), and steel industries are small, local firms that are linked by a capitalist market, even though they function in separate countries. These firms often go unnoticed, yet they are responsible for the creation of material cultures. One example is the Mardi Gras industry.

Mardi Gras beads, for example, are global chain commodities which are assembled, manufactured, painted, packaged, sold, and consumed in a multiplicity of ways. Workers in China produce them to survive and to provide money to their families, whereas U.S. revelers consume them as temporary currency during Mardi Gras. The purpose of this essay is to illustrate the connections between Mardi Gras bead consumers (see essay three) and Mardi Gras bead workers by tracing the global chain commodities from the festival where they are consumed to the factory where they are produced.

Since 1990, Mardi Gras beads have become fashionable objects in New Orleans, especially during Mardi Gras. The production, marketing, and supplying of Mardi Gras beads is currently a multi-million dollar industry, with six major bead outlets and numerous small bead businesses. Accent Annex is the largest distributor of Mardi Gras beads in the world. Dom Carlone, owner of Accent Annex, has assisted in transforming Mardi Gras into a fashion show where revelers compete with each other to obtain the “coolest” Mardi Gras beads. Accent Annex sells about 35 million Mardi Gras beads to customers around the world each year. The majority of Carlone’s customers are corporations such as Wal-Mart, K-Mart, and other large chain corporate stores, even though his business is local and not incorporated. In 2002 Accent Annex purchased 2,800,000 pounds of beads from the Tai Kuen Ornament Company located in Hong Kong, whereas Wong’s factory is located in Fuzhou, China. One-hundred percent of Carlone’s beads are produced in Wong’s factory.

Everyday Life in the Tai Kuen Mardi Gras Bead Factory

Similar to most manufacturing plants around the world, women constitute the majority of workers in the Tai Kuen Mardi Gras bead factory. The owner, Roger Wong, views the making of Mardi Gras beads as women's work, as ninety percent of the workers in the factory are female. The majority of workers are women (late teens and early twenties). Roger hires women to sew, assemble, paint, and pull beads from a machine, while he appoints the men lift heavy boxes and/or manage the women. Sewing, assembling, and painting beads are the lowest level positions in terms of status, advancement of opportunities, and wages. The feminization of the Mardi Gras bead factory is linked to essentialist assumptions about women and men. Roger defines women as naturally passive, easy to control, and obedient, whereas he assumes that men are naturally dominant, assertive, and strong. As Roger explains,

"Each year we try to hire lady workers, because we still believe that the lady workers are easier to control than the main workers."

"Why?" I inquired.

"The boys, they get into too much trouble – they gamble, fight, argue. The ladies, they don't do this."

Roger organizes the factory and implements hierarchical designs to control, dominate, and survey the workers. The arrangement of his factory reflects capitalist organizations based on inequality and hierarchy. Roger's factory, like capitalism, is organized on the supremacy of paternalism, the exploitation of labor, the maximizing of capital, a focus on profit, and the concentration of decision making by a few people (managers, inspectors, and owners). His factory implements managers, inspectors, security guards, rules, fines, and surveillance techniques to normalize the workers' behavior and maximize their production of beads. Roger expects the workers to adhere to a strict code of quality production while at the same time produce as many beads as possible. If the workers cannot meet the daily quota or fail to make "quality" beads for American consumers, the supervisors will deduct money from their wages. In Roger's words, "If the workers fail to make quality beads, we fine them."

The teenage peasants who leave their village to work in the Mardi Gras bead factory enter a culture with new regimes of discipline, norms, and values that govern their conduct and shape their everyday life. Most workers, for instance, must adjust their behavior to stringent time

schedules, strict factory rules, firm dorm regulations, exacting patterns of monotony, intensive production quotas, and twenty-four hour surveillance. The following diary entry explains the loneliness that some workers feel as a consequence of the disciplining procedures while working and living in the factory.

February 17, 2001

“When we arrived at the factory, we paid the deposit first and then Chen Yu helped accommodate us into the dorm. I share a small room with nine other workers. My dad went back home after lunch. I found that only Chen Yu and her family are from my hometown, all other workers are from different places. I feel quite lonely.

February 18, 2001

I started to work today at 11:00 a.m. It is not interesting at all. I worked for extra hours and when I got back, it was already 10:00 p.m. I am so tired, sleepy and homesick. I want to cry.

March 1, 2001

March It is awful to work like this. It's so hard for me to bear even one minute. I felt so tired these days. I wanted to quit suddenly. Everyday is the same; it's really very boring.”

Another worker told me,

“I'm bored, I don't like it.”

“Why?”

“Because after so long, to have to keep on doing this, and doing that! To keep on pulling, pulling, pulling! And then when it's time to eat, what are we eating today, tomorrow, next week...once you eat so much of it, it just gets frustrating and old. It's always the same thing.”

“When you're working, what are you thinking about?”

“I think about so many things, what has happened before in my past when I was at school, what I would do at home, what I am going to do when I get off work, watching TV, what I would do tomorrow when I get off work, I think about so many things.”

Bead workers also expressed discontent with performing the same routines repeatedly.

“I feel that everyday doing the same thing makes it become dull and meaningless. The long hours make me annoyed, always doing one thing to the other, it’s constant.”

“Can you tell me your daily schedule?”

“In the morning I get up at 6, and then after I get up I brush my teeth and wash my face. Eat breakfast, get ready and then at 6:45 go to work. I work till noon, 6:45am to noon. Then I go eat lunch, I get a hour’s break, and then continue working at 1. Then I work till 5, get a break for a hour and eat dinner, and then work again at 6. And then I work overtime till 9pm... The quality of living is low and poor. I have to work overtime every day, which makes me exhausted. Moreover, whenever you don’t do the job correctly, you will be fined or punished. In a day we usually work 11 hours because we are required to add on hours between meals. So all together it adds up to 14 hours. And if you don’t meet your quota at the end of the night your pay gets cut.”

“How do you make the beads everyday?”

“Well the beads you need to put in the machine. I use my left hand to put and keep the beads in the machine, my right hand to pull out the beads. Then you close the door, pull out the beads, close the door, pull out the beads, close the door, and repeat it all day. After you pull out the beads, you put them into two bags.”

“How many years have you worked this job?”

“Two and a half years.”

When asked, “What do you think about while you work?” the majority of workers said, “Nothing” or “How I can work faster to make more money.” One worker, for instance, told me, “Nothing! What is there to think about? I just do the same thing over and over again.” Another worker said, “Nothing! It’s boring. What can I think about? I have to concentrate on doing my job right. If I make a mistake, then the boss will fine me. It’s important to concentrate because I don’t want to get fined.”

“Do you have a certain minimum number of beads you need to make a day?”

“Usually we don’t, but others do. All the workers are always hard at work so we make as much as we can.”

“In this department are there any rules?”

“Yes. You can’t be late for work, we can’t talk too much, the floor always has to be clean, so there are a lot of different small things.”

“Right now there are some people chatting.”

“It’s just that they can’t leave their stations or get distracted. When we’re working at the tables, for example trying to work with our hands and have a conversation at the same time; that is a violation.”

“Do you have to have a lot of concentration?”

“Yes.”

“When you’re working, what do you think about?”

“I don’t think about anything.”

Another worker stated,

“What are you thinking right now?”

“I’m not thinking about anything; I’m just thinking about how to put the necklace together.”

“Why?”

“Because he [the manager] says if we don’t pay attention, we will mess up the necklace. So sometimes you just shouldn’t think if I want to do it right.”

One worker explained that she enjoys writing in her journal, but that recently her writing has become boring.

“When I started working here I kept a journal, but lately I have lost interested in writing.”

“Why do you get to the point when you lose interest in writing in your journal?”

“Well it feels that everyday is exactly the same. There is nothing new that happens. So it is pointless to write about the same thing everyday.”

“When you say that everyday events are the same, what do you mean?”

“It feels that everyday is just going to work, and then getting off work, going to work, getting off work. There is nothing new.”

“When you’re working, what do you think about?”

“What do I think about? Well it’s real boring, so I might think about home or about personal things.”

“How long have you worked here?”

“Almost 2 years.”

“What are you thinking right now, while you are working?”

“Right now, I want to go home and find a real responsible job.”

“What kind of job?”

“Making clothes.”

“Will you ever come back here to work in the future ever again?”

“No.”

“What are your plans for the future?”

“The future? How would I say it? I haven’t fully decided yet. I just want to find a real job. But no other plans besides that right now.”

“Why?”

“Right now, I am just working here to get some money and somewhat prepare myself for the future when I can slowly prosper and find a good job.”

Governing the Workers

What means has Roger invented to govern the bead workers, to shape or fashion their conduct in desired directions? How do his rules and punishments attempt to accomplish his goals

to increase productivity? According to Nicolas Rose (1999, p. 119), 'work experts' play a crucial role in linking the strategies to govern people with ways to maximize profit. One way they accomplish this link is by inventing human technologies. Human technologies are assemblages of diverse forces such as visual instruments, architectural forms, and persons to achieve certain ends, be they instilment of rules, punishment, production, or behavioral adjustment. Roger uses human technologies to transform the conduct of workers in desired directions, but the workers also enact their own technologies, as will be illustrated. For instance, management posts signs that remind the workers of the entailed punishments for violating the rules, if they get caught. In other words, power is exercised from the top-down, from the managers and owners to the workers and their bodies (even their feet). For instance, one day after eating lunch and rushing to wash their bowls, several workers congregated around a large 8'X12' sign hanging over the outdoor washing sink that stated, "Employees Chen Nan, Li Qun, Peng Xingxing, Wang Jing and Ge Yun were found wearing high heels today, which violated the rules of the factory. They have been fined 10 yuan per person." I asked the manager to explain why this sign was posted and he explained,

"It's a rule, when one wears high heeled shoes it's higher risk. And when you're at work, you need to do work, it's not appropriate. And if you twist your ankle and hurt yourself, you won't be able to work anymore."

"Do people still wear high heeled shoes?"

"We have to regulate and inspect, not many people do wear them anymore. But if we had a person forget, we'll remind them, but if it gets out of hand we'll have to punish."

"What kinds of shoes are appropriate?"

"It's usually flat shoes, like the ones I'm wearing would be fine."

"Why are they considered dangerous?"

"I think you can understand. High heels, what if you twist your ankle? It makes it easier to twist one's ankle when you wear high heels. The ones sitting there, that's not fine either. The danger aspect of it is one thing, but it's a company regulation. And if one person isn't allowed to wear high-heeled shoes, then no one is. High-heeled shoes are just not appropriate for the work place."

"Do the toes have to be in the shoes? Is that also a regulation?"

"Whether or not toes show doesn't matter, it's just no high heels."

“How do the women react about this rule?”

“I think their reaction is pretty understanding. They understand, not like you who think it’s odd.”

In this instance power is a resource that is utilized to inscribe awareness on the subjectivity of the workers and adjust their body (their feet, in this particular case). The (male) managers utilize expert knowledge and exert their paternalistic role in this example. They suggest that they know what’s best for the workers by ordering them to wear work shoes. The link between controlling conduct and controlling the body is created by an interest to maximize efficiency and adjust the worker’s attitude toward themselves and their managers. To work on the worker’s feet is to simultaneously produce a new attitude of approaching work. This is just one illustration of how paternalism and hierarchy in the bead factory shapes and utilizes workers to pursue certain objectives that were created by the boss. But why does this type of governance depend upon the invention of human technologies?

First, the networks of power convert the workers into productive people, both at home and at work, by removing obstacles that impede them from working more efficiently. Second, it corrects their conduct and their attitude by producing a new way of thinking about and approaching their behavior. Surveillance techniques ensure that the workers will consider the consequences of their actions; the workers must calculate the costs and benefits of their actions (e.g., If I wear high-healed shoes today, then I might get fined if I get caught. I don’t want to get fined, so I won’t wear high-healed shoes). Third, it produces a conscience that forces the workers to train their conduct without physical interference by the boss. In other words, Roger and his managers govern at a distance by making it possible for the workers to govern and act upon themselves according to a set of rules, norms, and penalties which they must internalize. These governing procedures ground their decisions and ways of thinking in such a way that they must choose to conform to the reformatory designs. The workers consequentially come to conceive of their life, feet, bodies, selves, and attitudes inside the factory in new ways -- by adjusting to new rules, conforming to spatial designs, and wearing the appropriate shoes.

The workers are not completely passive; they develop strategies and tactics to resist the hierarchical arrangements in the factory compound and the exploitive conditions created through global capitalism. For instance, workers hold hands, provide each other support, develop solid friendships, sew gifts for each other when they are not working, take bathroom breaks together, gossip, care for each other, share stories, and even organize against the owner (although organizing is extremely rare). Some workers even confront the supervisors, as illustrated in the following story.

“Let’s say that the boss is unfair, has there ever been a time when you all group together to stand up for yourselves?”

“Yes, usually our boss is fair to us. But it is the manager who cut our pay once, and he cut it, and we all stopped working, and it wasn’t till he raised our pay again would we have agreed to continue working.”

“Who led the group, who decided...when you rebelled, who led it?”

“It was everyone who decided to not work, we all didn’t work. The ones who have done it before, the older workers, they all had knowledge of how much each of the pieces were, and they let us know. And told us to all stop working.”

“How long did you stop working?”

“Just half a day.”

“When did you protest to work, during the day or the night?”

“During the morning.”

“Did you have a meeting agreeing that everyone wouldn’t work?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“Here. Our manager came over and told us if we worked he would increase our pay.”

“Did the manager punish anyone?”

“Yes, they don’t work here anymore.” [they were fired]

Roger’s regime of discipline rationalizes the workers’ routines, shapes their habits, and changes their attitudes. Over time the workers learn how to adjust to the daily time schedule and repetitive ringing bells that signal when to leave work, eat lunch, shower, and prepare for work. Roger’s training techniques also govern the workers to take ‘pride’ in their work and ‘dedicate’ themselves to their specific task. For instance, one supervisor explained that when the new workers undergo training techniques, he tells them to “make sure you put care into making these beads! Americans will be purchasing these beads for their festival. Americans, they are important people and they will use these beads for an important festival! If you fail to make quality beads, the Americans will think you are not good workers and they will not respect you!” Over time the

workers learn how to adjust to the daily time schedule and repetitive ringing bells that signal when to leave work, eat lunch, shower, and prepare for work.

This training technique is a way of situating and convincing the workers to believe they are making trinkets for people who are 'superior' to them. In other words, the discursive component of the training techniques conveys to the workers that they have a duty to please and satisfy American carnival consumers so that, in turn, the American's satisfaction indicates that the workers have done a their duty well. The workers do not work for themselves or on their own terms; they are interpellated to imagine they are working to please the American consumer, save money for their family, and fulfill Roger's demands. The smile on Roger's face results from the excitement that the carnival consumers experience when they exchange the beads that the factory workers produced. The rows of blank looks on the inert faces of exploited workers, who sit for fifteen hours each day making Mardi Gras beads are matched by the blissful smiles on the oblivious faces of the carnival consumers who exchange them for nudity. This form of exploitation is a partial result of the carnival consumers' demand for a cornucopia of fashionable trinkets. Roger's and the Mardi Gras bead workers' sense of satisfaction comes from the approval of the American carnival consumers.

Structuring Authority

Workers adjust to the repetition, strict factory rules, and piecework schedules by slowing "getting used to it" and learning to discipline and control themselves. As one worker explains, "It's hard to work here. We do the same work over and over again. We share rooms with each other and every day is the same. It's just something we get used to doing and something we adjust to, but it's not easy." Ten workers share five beds in a 16'X24' dorm room. The limited space creates conflict among the workers. Arguments between roommates develop over who has access to the limited space. Instead of understanding why the limited access to space creates conflict, however, Roger believes the arguments and fights develop because rural women have a "special way of thinking." In Roger's words,

"These workers, from the rural areas, they are not like you and me. They are not from the city. They are stupid; they are uncivilized. They like to spit; they throw their orange wrappings on the ground. So we fine them for spitting and tossing their rubbish on the ground. Slowly they get used to it and you begin to see them change."

Roger does not consider the possibility that the limited access to space and twenty-four hour surveillance create conflicts among the workers. Compounding these regulations and conflicts are the collective punishments that Roger and his supervisors administer to workers in dormitories. When one worker violates a rule, every person in the dorm is punished. As Roger explains,

“We punish the whole room when one person breaks the rule. If someone doesn’t turn off the water, we punish the entire room. They don’t pay for the water; it’s expensive. Two girls...Last year two girls got into fight. One threw hot water on the other one because they didn’t want to wait in line. You see, one girl did not want to wait in line to use the water in the nighttime, after her job. After their job they take a hot shower. They must wait in line. We didn’t punish them, but we warned them not to do it again. So there are arguments and fighting, but it happens seldom. If the circumference is not so good, and if you give them too much pleasure, then I believe they will be more arguing, fighting, and criminal things coming up. But my space here is good. People like it. When you walk in this factory, you don’t hear a lot of sound, it’s not too noisy. When you walk in other factories, it’s hot. But here, nothing, you hear nothing, right? You hear the fans, but the fans are just blowing on the beads so they will not melt together. It’s not so hot, but it’s acceptable.”

Another way management structures authority is by placing a large 8’X12’ chalkboard next to the time clock at the start of every shift; it is the first visual form of information the workers see once they enter the factory. The chalkboard explains the total number of beads each worker produced individually and collectively (in pounds) the previous day and it also explains their daily quota. The workers are fined if they do not meet the quota and rewarded for producing high yields of beads. As Roger explains,

“We have a board to show the quantity. This is the quantity from yesterday, which is 7,998 pounds of beads. We keep this record to see if they are working properly or if they are not. You see, we have a list here. It is here so the workers can understand the minimum quantity that they should produce everyday. Otherwise, if you don’t give them a list, they will work very slowly. But this list says, if you work hard, get to the standard, get to the level, then you get 10% more as a benefit or bonus. If you get less than this quantity, there’s a 5% punishment. Again, we talk about punishment.”

Roger’s purpose of organizing the factory in this manner is to manufacture normalizing techniques and structure authority in their everyday lives. Normalizing techniques enable Roger

and the managers to control the everyday lives of workers, minimize resistance, and achieve the goal of maximizing the output of Mardi Gras beads so that revelers will have a plethora of beads to exchange during Carnival. A persistent theme in Roger's discussion of the workers was his belief that they were "stupid" and had a "special way of thinking." His belief is that young females from the rural countryside are "dumb and undisciplined." As such, Roger designed the factory to discipline and control the workers' movements and, most importantly, to keep them inside the factory compound and away from the city. His overall goal is to create an aesthetic factory with systematic methods to monitor the workers and simultaneously guarantee a steady and consistent supply of productive, inexpensive labor. Roger hopes to decrease the probability of workers leaving the factory to search for another job and he attempts to decrease their probability of showing up late to work. For instance, Roger told me in passing one day, "The workers, they are strange. They always want to find another job, but they can't leave except on Sundays. They try to invent excuses to leave during the week, but they can't leave. They must have a pass to get out. They have no other choice. They must stay here, and work here, and they must follow [rules and orders]." How does he attempt to accomplish this goal?

First, he hired workers to build onsite dorms with a basketball court, showers, canteen, and a small park. He also disallowed workers to leave the premises without permission (except on Sundays). Second, he creates long working hours (e.g., each worker is required to work a minimum of 10 hours a day and sometimes they are required to work up to eighteen hours a day) and imposes twenty-four hour surveillance in the form of security guards at the gate, security guards who walk the complex to watch the workers, name tags for the workers, inspectors who monitor the workers while working, and managers who oversee the production quotas. In fact, Roger's brother, who has a Ph.D. in architecture from the University of Leeds, designed the factory to increase the surveillance of the workers and to limit their access outside of the factory. Building dorms inside the factory simultaneously decreases the probability of workers leaving to search for another job as well as increases the probability that workers will arrive to work on time. Third, he requires the workers to work six to seven days a week. Finally, he requires some of the workers to wear red Nike and Adidas hats in order to increase their surveillance and "keep an eye on them." As Roger explained to me one day,

"Everybody's got to wear a red hat. We want everybody to wear a red hat. First of all, especially the ladies because usually they have long hair. So we want their hair to be twisted and remain inside the hat so that if their hair is too long, it may get into the machine. That makes a problem; it's dangerous. And it's hot in here. If they bundle it up it makes it much better. Plus, it's a red color it's easier for us to see where they are. Most of the people who control the machines, they have to wear red hats, but the supervisor doesn't have to ... I love standing here on the deck of

this factory. I am able to see what the workers are doing and where they are going. My brother designed the factory so that I can see everything. He went to school in England, at the University of Leeds and studied architecture. All my brothers and sisters went to school.”

Living in the Garden of Discipline

Leaving the factory is even more difficult than attempting to be unseen, as each worker must go through an elaborate process to exit the gated factory. First, workers must write a letter to their supervisor requesting permission to leave the premises and explain why they need to leave. Their supervisor, in turn, will either approve the request or deny it. If denied, the worker cannot leave. If approved, the letter and the supervisor’s approval are sent to the area manager, who will decide whether he will approve the request. If denied, the worker cannot leave. If approved, the area supervisor will send the letter to the factory supervisor, who will make the ultimate decision whether to grant permission. If the supervisor affirms the request, then the worker can leave the factory, with stipulations. If denied, the worker cannot leave and cannot appeal the request during any stage in the chain of commands. Roger explains some of the rules and regulations.

“What are some of the other rules and regulations?”

“Well, there are many regulations here. There are many rules here. Now, if the people want to have a day off, if they want to walk out to downtown or somewhere else, they have to get permission from the supervisor. And the supervisor, if he or she thinks it is unsuitable then he will not give it. If they don’t allow them, then they are not allowed to go. If they allow them to go, still, the supervisor must inform the head, the manager [of the plant] and he’s the guy who finally says yes or no. This is the regulation. You see why, here in China, most of the workers are not close by towns; they are from other cities. And these workers, they have a very special thinking, I don’t know why. Sometimes they don’t have anything to do outside, but they will say, “I’m sorry, I cannot work today, I feel bad, I feel sick, I want a day off.” And when you say, “Okay, you can go, but give me the doctor’s certificate to prove that you are sick,” they will never be able to get one. And sometimes they go out not because they have an appointment, they go out because they have something wrong with their mind. They say, “Well, maybe I don’t want to work today; maybe I will go out and find another job.” Then they will walk out and maybe they don’t come back! They won’t come back for another two days and then say, “Well, I just went there and my friend ask me and they tell me to stay there for two days,” but actually, no! They find a job, they tried it for two

days, and they come back! That's a problem, you know! So we try to set up this regulation that if they want to go out, they have to get permission."

The factory is open twenty-four hours a day, eleven and a half months a year. Workers find it difficult to adjust to the discipline, conformity, and routine living and working conditions. The daily routine of making Mardi Gras beads varies from relaxed to rigorous, but every aspect of the production process is detailed and monotonous. Workers who work the day and night shift, for instance, have different schedules. The factory bell awakens the day shift workers at 6:00am and indicates to the night shift that work is over, unless they are required to work overtime. As soon as the 6:00am bell rings, the night shift workers quickly leave their stations, wash their hands in the outdoor sink, rush to their dorm room, grab their bowl, and wait in line to eat dinner, the same dinner that the workers on the day shift eat for breakfast: rice, bread, and sometimes vegetables. After eating, the night and day shift workers wash their bowls in a collective sink and return to their rooms. The night shift workers prepare for a shower in the collective washroom while the day shift workers prepare for work, which begins at 7:00am. Every worker must arrive at their station approximately 8 minutes before work begins, or else they run the risk of getting fined. The bell rings for seventeen seconds at exactly 7:00AM and the day shift begins working.

A normal shift varies from 10 hours to 12 hours, depending on the quota and the type of job they perform. Overtime is mandatory. If the workers refuse to work overtime, they are fined. For instance, a worker who pulls Mardi Gras beads from a machine must work a minimum of twelve hours per day and up to eighteen on busy days. All workers get one lunch break that ranges from thirty minutes to one hour, and then immediately return to work after they wash their bowls in a collective sink. Sometimes workers will skip lunch in order to work, hoping to make more money. Workers who paint, package, string, or mold Mardi Gras beads, however, normally work a ten hour shift and on busy days and reported working up to eighteen hours a day to finish the order. No worker is allowed to talk during either shift. If the supervisor identifies them talking, he is supposed to warn or admonish them first, and then fine them if they continue talking. Despite these strict regulations, the workers usually do not have time to talk to each other because they are paid by the number of pieces/beads they produce. The workers understand that talking interrupts their repetition of making beads. Dom Carlone, owner of Accent Annex, explains this process.

"You see, they don't work by the hour, they work piece work and they get paid for what they accomplish. And for every necklace they make they get so much for that necklace. Now if they work ten hours instead of eight hours, they're gonna make extra money. Or if they work twelve

hours or fifteen hours, they're gonna make more money than working just eight hours. Because they're getting paid by the piece. I'd say the average is \$2.00 to \$3.00 dollars a day. Some probably make only a \$1.75 or a \$1.50. It all depends on how fast they go. They're interested in, "how much can I get done today, how much money can I make, because if I talk I'm going to miss the beat." So they don't talk. They just sit there and they work, they work, they work, they work. It's strictly business and that's what they're there for. There's no fooling around. Because if they don't put out, they don't get paid. Quite a system. It works for them. It would never work in the United States, but it works for them ... I've walked into the factory where they've had five hundred people, five hundred people sitting at long tables on stools putting beads together. And you could hear a pin drop. They don't talk to one another, not while they're working. They're not talking, not shooting the bull. Because if they're talking to one another, they're not producing. They're getting paid for what they do, not the fact that they're there. They don't leave this place. They've got a wall around it. They've got a gate that you go in and out. Once you go out you don't come back in. Now, but they're free to go. They're not prisoners. This is a choice they make. This is the choice and these are the rules."

Workers and their Money

The end of Carnival in New Orleans is the beginning of work for the Chinese beadmakers. In March Accent Annex's customers immediately begin placing orders for the next Mardi Gras and the workers continue toiling rapidly to fulfill those quotas. Disciplined and eager, the workers need the money they earn from making beads. What do the workers do with the little money they make at the factory?

The majority of the workers send the majority of their earnings (90%) home to their parents. Their parents use that money to build a house, buy machines, pay their son's education or wedding, or purchase animals for the farm. Therefore, the Chinese beadmakers value their jobs for the money they earn and for the perception of "independence" they gain. For instance, several workers in the factory considered making Mardi Gras beads as developing their autonomy. They felt independent because they were on their own. Nevertheless, the majority of workers regarded the work as boring, tedious, and "okay." Earning wages, they reported, is rewarding because it enables them to consume goods and send money home to their family. Although the women workers are seen in the eyes of their family as being more valuable, their economic independence is illusory. Up to ninety-percent of their wages are sent home to support their family or brothers' schooling.

In return for sending their wages home, the workers sit silently side-by-side at tables making Mardi Gras beads; many workers are isolated from each other while they work. Sometimes they will talk to each other when the supervisor is not watching them. These conditions of discipline and conformity in the factory curtail their joy for life. As Dom explains, Mardi Gras bead workers don't get paid by the hour; they get paid by the number of beads they paint, pull, sculpt, polish, or package. Talking interrupts their routine, slows down their productivity, and prevents them from making more money. Consequently, all the workers sit silently and concentrate on making beads by looking directly at the pieces they are assembling. For this tedious, painstaking work, the beadmakers' pay ranges from U.S. 10 to .28 cents an hour. The majority of workers send the money they earn home to support their families or their brothers (i.e., weddings, education). One worker explains.

"I get paid by the pound. I'm doing the same thing as I do everyday. It's awful.

"Why does the boss cut your pay?

"A lot of reasons.

"What reasons?

"For example, when somebody burns the engine, she will be deducted 100 yuan. And when the products do not meet the quality standard, he will also deduct money from us. It's never easy here. I feel really sad when they deduct 100 yuan. It's hard to let go of it. One week! It takes one week for us to earn up to 100 yuan.

So you feel very bad about it?

Yeah.

Other people, don't dare to speak up?

Yeah, they are afraid. But that is not a big deal.

Why isn't anyone else willing to speak up?

Well, I guess that other workers are afraid of being punished by the boss because of what they said to you.

If you do not make a mistake, they won't punish you.

What don't you like about the work?

I am very tired, and the working hours are too long. In addition, the pay isn't decent enough.

How long have you worked here? 2 years.

Do you think you're happy? No, I don't feel happy. I don't want to do this kind of work continuously.

What do you want to do next year?

Next year I don't feel like coming back.

Do you want to go to school?

(Nodding) I am making money here in order to support my younger brother who thus can go to school.

What is your younger brother doing?

He is studying at school.

Why are you making this money for your brother?

It's because we are poor. If I go to school, my brother cannot go to school then. Only one of us can go to school.

Because you're here, you can't go to school.

I will definitely go back to school if I have a chance.

If just your little brother goes to school, don't you think that is unfair?

Unfairness is irrelevant. I am willing to sacrifice for my brother.

The workers use the remaining money to go shopping on the weekends, buy bread inside the factory, or purchase small items such as phone cards, Coca-Cola, fruit, sunflower seeds, or beer. For instance, one Sunday in July a worker named Tian Ju allowed me to go shopping with her at the local village. She spent approximately three hours walking from store to store carefully looking at clothes and shoes.

"This weekend I get to buy something for myself," she told me. "Normally I send most of my money to my family, but I've saved enough to buy something for me today."

"What are you going to buy?"

"Earlier I found a pair of pink pants that I want. Maybe I'll get those."

Indeed, she returned to the store and bargained with the owner for about fifteen minutes until they both agreed on a price for the pants. Tian Ju bought the pants and left with a smile.

On Sundays several vendors from the city wait outside the gated factory, next to the rural highway to sell items to the workers. The vendors provide fruit, radios, CDs, music, corn, magazines, newspapers, shoes, bracelets, necklaces, and yarn to weave shoes. During the evening the workers check their mail at the entrance of the closed gate and call their families back home (the workers only see their families once a year for less than a week). The letters and photographs that arrive signify special occasions that create excitement and pleasure. When a worker receives a letter or photographs, for instance, the roommates eagerly surround her and ask her to share the photos or read the letter out loud. If the letter is not personal she usually agrees and reads it out loud to everyone. For instance, one day a sixteen year-old woman named Rein May received a letter from a friend whom she had not seen for two years. Excited, she announced to everyone that her friend “finally” wrote her. “Do you feel comfortable reading the letter out loud?” I asked. “Yes, but I want to read it alone first.” Ten minutes later Rein May returned and told me the letter was personal and made her sad. “I want to read it out loud to you.”

“How are you? I’m sorry that I have not written to you for a long time. I don’t know if you’re doing the same as you were. Sorry that since I have come here, I have only written once before. The pictures with the sea view have been sent, I have to take another picture without the sea view for you. But then you have to send a picture of you to me. When I look at them, I will think of our old friendship, the past and our memories. To tell you the truth, I miss you so much and I can still memorize the way and gesture when you talk. So please don’t forget our promise, give me a call at the end (30th) of the year. I really don’t want to make anymore clothes here, I just want to come home to you guys, and live our old lives we once had; with no worries. I have many worries now. It feels like jail, you are constantly being watched, whether eating, talking, working, you are under the supervision all the time. To be honest, I think the time goes by so quickly. Anyway, I can go back home in a month and half! Oh, Yan May, did you see the meteor on November 18th, did you make a wish? Well, I want to finish my letter now, don’t forget to send me your picture. When you are back home, please give me a call. Wish you happy everyday and with no worries. Wish you lead a life better than mine everyday!”

Beginning or Ending of Mardi Gras?

Where and when does the consumption and production of Mardi Gras beads end and begin? Bead artists at Accent Annex digitally design the beads using a computer and then email a JPEG image of the bead to Roger. Roger will print the JPEG and give the image to the artist in

the factory to mold out of clay. After molding the clay into a bead, Roger creates a prototype steel mold to duplicate the standardized beads. Next, the workers dye, cut, sew, and package the beads. The beads are shipped from Fuzhou to Hong Kong and from Hong Kong to California. Finally, workers in California load the containers of beads on to a train. The train delivers them to New Orleans for consumption and workers place on the shelves of Mardi Gras Madness (Accent Annex). The production of the material culture of Carnival occurs eleven and half months out of the year from the perspective of the Mardi Gras factory workers. From the perspective of most revelers in the United States who consume these beads, Carnival occurs over the course of a few days. As one reveler excitedly told me, "Carnival occurs for this one weekend out of the year so I'm going to make the best of it!"

A myth that many revelers like to tell themselves is that Carnival is a liberatory, democratic space in which all people are equal and free. While this myth might capture the experiences of a few revelers and Krewe members, for the workers in China this characterization does not accurately reflect their experiences. In fact, many of the factory workers had never heard of Carnival or Mardi Gras, even though they were making beads for Mardi Gras. "Mardi Gras? What's that?" one female bead worker responded as she quickly and skillfully sewed beads together using a needle and thread. "It's a celebration in the United States. People will use the beads you're making to celebrate and play." "These beads? Why? They're ugly," she stated as she shrugged her shoulders. Perhaps the ugliness she sees in the beads is due to the profane work she repetitively performs daily. What is considered sacred to revelers is considered profane to workers; what is play for Mardi Gras consumers is work for Mardi Gras beadmakers. The following conversation provides an example.

"Do you know anything else, regarding what the beads are about?"

"Well, I heard that the Americans would remove their clothes in order to get those beads. Is that right?"

"David showed me the picture."

"Before he told me, I even didn't know what these beads were used for, how you would use them. I always used to wonder why they wanted these beads. They do not look pretty at all, do they? I was told that the Americans would remove their clothes just for these ugly beads. I could not believe it! But I also saw pictures showing Americans fighting for the beads in my boss's office. And he also showed me the picture, which made me believe them."

"Who did you think you were making these beads for?"

"I knew they were exported to the U.S."

“Did you know what they were being used for?”

“I knew that these beads were used during the new year’s festival, they would put them around the neck, but after that they would throw them away.”

“So now that you know that some people take off their clothes just to get these beads, what would you want to say?”

“Don’t snatch! Don’t grab! They’re ugly!”

“You think that these are very ugly?”

“I think just the act of removing the clothes to grab the beads is not worthwhile.”

“Can you elaborate on why you think it is so ugly?”

“Because we see so many beads like this, I think they are ugly. It’s because everyday all we do is pull them and make them, I guess I just see them too much.”

One day in the middle of work I passed out a variety of photographs to the workers while they were assembling beads. The photographs were of revelers at Mardi Gras exposing their butts, penises, and breasts in return for beads. Each worker stopped working, crowded around the photographs, and discussed their opinions of the photographs. Soon afterwards, they began passing the photographs around the factory to other workers. The factory, in turn, became a space for their temporary carnival, as all the workers were laughing in amazement! Below is the conversation that ensued.

Do you know, the beads you make, what are done with them?

[Looking at the photograph] I saw a person butt naked! And all they have on are the beads around their neck.

They just love those beads a lot!

David says that over the holiday, people get the beads, and the men take off their pants.

Why do they love those beads so much?

For presents

We have absolutely no interest in the beads!

After looking at the picture, do you want to say anything about it?

I think that we do not look pretty wearing with those beads, but those Americans look pretty wearing them. When they put it on, it looks like they're drinking something.

What do you think when you see this picture?

Embarrassed.

He says that sometimes they even take off their underwear.

They are ... [crazy]

And the women just take off all their clothes.

How is that possible? We Chinese are different from Americans in that respect, we are not used to things like that.

Then what is your custom then, what makes you happy?

Happiness, during holidays our families just sit at the table together and tell jokes.

Have you ever done this here? No

If something like this happened here, how would you feel?

Very embarrassed. We think we would be ashamed, embarrassed, but Americans think it is interesting.

But it's just their customs.

Right exactly, and that is how we are different.

Look at the naked butts!

Are all of you very surprised?

Yes, all the nudity...we would never have thought that.

CONCLUSION

Few people realize that the plethora of Mardi Gras beads that people exchange for nudity and the fun that results from this experience can only occur by structuring the global economy so that it benefits the consuming revelers, while isolating and exploiting workers (yet it is increasingly difficult to separate "worker" and "consumer" today). During the last twenty years the Mardi Gras bead industry has expanded tremendously to include bead exchange at almost every beach in

the United States, during Spring Break, in Las Vegas, Disney World, Iraq, and thousands of other venues. The numerous places where these beads are consumed compared to the location where they are produced are so far apart that consumers and producers are completely unaware of each other. The one common item that both the consumers and producers have held is a plastic commodity called Mardi Gras beads. Does our global society value the production of plastic for profit over the real human needs of people?

Appendix/Table A. The Tai Kuen Factory's Production of Mardi Gras beads from 1982 to 2002.

1982	5 containers
1983	5 containers
1984	5 containers
1985	6 containers
1986	10 containers
1987	12 containers
1988	14 containers
1989	18 containers
1990	22 containers
1991	24 containers
1992	30 containers
1993	32 containers
1994	33 containers
1995	35 containers
1996	40 containers
1997	42 containers
1998	45 containers
1999	50 containers
2000	60 containers
2001	65 containers
2002	70 containers