

# Synopsis & Notes from **China Blue**

## **Synopsis**

By Micha X. Peled, Director

China Blue takes us inside a blue-jeans factory, where Jasmine and her friends Orchid and Li Ping, are trying to survive the harsh working environment. Their lives intersect that of the film's other protagonist and factory owner, Mr. Lam. Providing perspectives from both the top and bottom levels of the factory's hierarchy, this film brings complex issues of globalization to the human level.

Like millions before her, Jasmine leaves her Sichuan village to help her family with a job in a far-away factory. There she meets 14-years-old Li Ping, who is already an experienced seamstress. During brief lunch breaks Jasmine watches another co-worker Orchid, who turns their 12-bed dorm room into a disco. These friendships would provide her only solace as Jasmine's initial excitement soon melts away. The long work hours seven days a week, the merciless fine system and the delays in pay are overwhelming.

Orchid, who specializes in zippers, is the only one with an easier schedule. Later, Orchid uses the New Year holiday to go home after two years away and introduce her boyfriend to her parents, hoping for their approval. Chinese New Year is the only time off the workers get in the entire year, but Jasmine cannot afford yet the expensive two-day trip back.

To get a new order from a promising British buyer, Mr. Lam must agree to extremely low prices and a very tight delivery schedule. For the deal to work, he cuts his workers' pay and requires them to work around the clock.

While the film shows how our global economic system leaves the Chinese factory owner with few choices, it also explores in detail what that means for the workers. Anxious to avoid getting fined for falling asleep on the job, Jasmine and Li Ping sneak out of the factory to buy energy tea, but they get caught and are fined anyway. Other workers resort to keeping their eyes open by clipping clothespins on their eyelids. When the workers' endurance reaches a breaking point, their only recourse may be a strike, which is illegal in China.

China Blue paints a nuanced, tender and ultimately moving portrait of the daily lives of the young workers who make our clothes. It also brings an updated and alarming report on the economic pressures applied by Western companies and their human consequences. The Boston Phoenix called it "heartbreaking, truly unforgettable" and Variety commented that "the Pic's degree of access and intimacy is surprising. Indeed, after you get to know Jasmine and Li Ping, shopping will never be the same.

The film was made without permission from the Chinese authorities. During production the crew was stopped by the police numerous times. On one occasion the crew was arrested and interrogated. Tapes were confiscated and never returned, despite inquiries by the American consulate.

China Blue was an official selection at the Toronto International Film Festival and won the Amnesty Human Rights Award at the International Documentary Festival in Amsterdam.

## Notes

Lifeng Factory - Shaxi, China

Shaxi is a designated clothing production center for China.

*“At Lifeng Factory, we never miss a deadline, even if we have to work all night.”*

*“Meeting deadline goals is our number 1 priority.”*

### **Jasmine – 16 year old**

Parents send her to work in a factory – a 2.5 day train ride from their rural home. They are farmers who have no electricity and use no mechanization.

Older sister is in high school but the family needs more income to ensure that she can stay in school.

Jasmine is happy to help her family financially, by getting this job.

### **Pay rates at the factory**

Jasmine is assigned the job of thread cutting on jeans. It takes her 30 minutes per pair of jeans. She gets paid 6 cents per finished pair or 12 cents an hour.

Jasmine’s roommate, Jade, makes \$60-\$70 per month during peak periods of high demand. During off-peak periods she makes \$25-\$35 per month.

Orchid, a skilled worker of three years, makes up to \$120 a month as a zipper installer.

In addition to the pay, Jasmine is housed in a factory dormitory. Twelve women share a room. Each room has running water and a toilet.

Cost of food served at the factory cafeteria is deducted from pay. Workers must also pay for hot water.

### **Mr. Lam, factory owner**

Started the denim factory two years prior to this video and has numerous competitors. Currently employs 750 workers.

Lam believes that today, versus 20 years ago, factory workers have a lot more power and control over their destiny.

He believes he must use two types of leadership styles: relaxed and iron fist. “I prefer relaxed but you can’t let the workers get out of control. They are uneducated. Low caliber. They are 20 years behind. You can’t teach them work ethics. It’s beyond them.”

Lam also says, "What matters is efficiency. We have to make rush orders. Everyone works long hours. Our workers are content because they have all they need --food, personal items, housing.

He believes that the use of slogans will motivate the employees. e.g. "If you don't work hard today, you'll look hard for work tomorrow."

Lam provides a free midnight snack to his employees when they need to work overtime. He claims that his employees are not trustworthy because they inflate their production numbers.

### **Policies and Practices**

Employees must use a punch clock and are fined for each minute they punch in late.

Overtime by employees is required upon demand. No bonus is paid for working overtime. When there is work to complete, there are no days off and the employees may have to work 20 hour days. The supervisor's job focuses on keeping the employees awake and producing. If an employee falls asleep, (s)he is fined.

Pay distribution is sporadic. Owner can delay the distribution of pay for months.

Government labor laws regarding pay and working conditions are ignored.

The first month's pay is held as a deposit against an employee leaving work without permission

Various fines are levied against the workers for things such as leaving the premises without permission.

Supervisors can set the piecemeal pay rates for each of their employees.

Lam was angry that workers were angry about the pay delays. Lam laments that as a police officer he couldn't step over the line but as a business owner, he must, if he is going to compete. He feels that his workers don't understand his position.

The employees refuse to return to work during a rush order. During their meeting with Lam, he ignores their comments about no pay and non-paid overtime. He says "You are all standing here, how can I ship the order? If you have a problem, talk to me. You are all wasting time, that's no help. I don't care [about your complaints and problems], if you strike now and I can't deliver on time, you are fighting against me."

Reluctantly, Lam agrees to calculate their pay, but will not pay them until the current rush order is completed. "The workers only want to feather their own nest," he claims.

Workers receive no paid vacation but will often return home for a month during the Chinese New Year. If there is business, a factory owner will not release the employees.

### **Working Standards in Chinese Factories**

According to Dr Kaiming, an international retail inspector, the working conditions at Lam's factory are better than most.

A factory that allowed its workers adequate rest and paid minimum wage would not be able to compete. The major brands demand such low prices that factories must violate international labor standards.

International inspections don't work. The inspections are announced in advance. Workers are threatened with firing if they don't report their conditions as acceptable. It's also recognized by the retail industry that most Chinese factories falsify their records.