Mardi Gras: Made in China is a film that reveals hidden interdependencies. Tracing the travels of plastic beads from factory floors in Fujian, China to the streets of New Orleans, the documentary creates an intriguing story because these spaces appear in many ways as contrasts to the other. One is a city in the First World nation-state of the United States; the second is located in the People's Republic of China. One is a space of consumption and release, the other of production and discipline. Showing how the flow of global capital links these two places that seem radically different, the documentary makes visible what is often left unacknowledged as part of the world economy. It challenges the "dynamic of valorization that has sharply increased the distance between the devalorized and valorized" (Sassen 87). It is at once a record of this incredible distance between two realities and an attempt to reduce that gap through a reminder of our everyday complicity in these structures of exploitation. Mardi Gras beads seem like a particularly interesting commodity to trace because of the context in which they are used, but the filmmakers could obviously have chosen to trace the movement of any mundane commodity and exposed similarly appalling cases of exploitation. I was reminded of Anna Tsing’s project of tracing the production and consumption of matsutake mushrooms while watching the documentary, and how Mardi Gras was probably an appealing topic because it is so visually rich and also allows the filmmakers to draw from the tropes of free and liberal West vs. repressed and conservative East as well as that of obnoxious American vs. shy Asian.

But allow me to go back to the phrase, “structures of exploitation”. I remember that you posed a question in class yesterday along the lines of “is it the structures per se that is the problem?” As I’m mulling over this question, I’m reminded of the scenes where Roger Wong and Dom Carlone each say “if it weren’t me, it would be someone else”: if Wong hadn’t set up the factory, someone else would have; if Carlone didn’t have a contract with factories like Wong’s, someone else would be outsourcing to them anyway. This statement seems to overlap with Pun Ngai’s assertion that “[t]he hegemonic interest in displacing a possible class society with an open society…[is] a political process that is often legitimated by reference to irresistible and invisible market forces” (38). These are the stories they tell themselves to sleep at night; to be sure, these are statements that are probably true. In some strange parallel perhaps to Pun Ngai’s observation that the dagongmei are not dupes, Carlone and Wong are not entirely oblivious to their acts of exploitation. Both parties conceive of their positions as created and bounded by structure. A dagongmei in the film says, “Those of us who are not educated and don't have good family background have no choice but to work hard and support ourselves.” Wong and Carlone attempt to absolve their guilt by portraying their agency as diminished because they are tied to the system of capitalist competition.

This rhetoric parallels a discourse I often hear in Korea about cram schools. Everyone in agrees that the situation is insane: kids as young as five attending private language schools, middle and high schoolers spending more than 12 hours a day studying at school and in cram schools. It’s become almost impossible for a student of the lower class whose family cannot afford cram schools or private language academies to enter what are considered the top colleges in South Korea. But, many parents say that they cannot stop unless everyone decides to stop all together at once. Everyone is afraid of falling behind, of their child and family becoming the unfortunate victim. Nevertheless, some choose to depart from this excruciating cycle. Of course the choice to do so is influenced by many external factors such as class position. The perception that going a different way is a viable option at all is itself dependent on many external constraints. But while I see the decision (for those who can afford it) to not send one’s child to cram schools as a difficult and brave one, I refuse to believe that one cannot break the cycle unless everyone agrees to. I find it impossible to agree with Wong and Carlone’s assertion that “they can’t help it”.

Pun Ngai, like many of the authors we have read in this class, walks a tightrope between power and resistance. Her use of the concept of performativity, and emphasis on dagongmei as a subjectivity that is both made and unmade, seems to resonate with Butler’s notion that the very constructedness of these structural positions allow for acts of resistance in their performance. So perhaps we return to that old line from Marx: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please”. Agency is a fraught concept. We are born into a world that is already in a state of play and internalize its rules over time. But people are not equivalent to the systems they inherit.

“If you got something that gives you joy, don’t question it.” Yet Ms. Pearl already has questioned, and is fairly aware that her moments of joy are dependent upon the suffering of others. Toward the end of the film, we learn that the dagongmei she wonders about have written a letter requesting their employer to adhere to minimum wage laws. Ms. Pearl herself is shown bustling about her home as she hosts more than a dozen people post-Hurricane Katrina. It is easy to feel powerless, but they show that there are still some choices that have been and can be made. These choices are never those of the fully informed and autonomous liberal subject. Yet it would be irresponsible to not strive to do one’s best.