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[Kite Zhang's Kites.](#)

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Rethinking 'Made in China': a Review of Kite Zhang's Kites.

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Made in China?

Growing up in Britain as a child I was very much cognisant of certain stereotypes regarding China. Some of these included essentialist or racist stereotypes around the notion that all Chinese people were 'good' at maths and/or that they 'all' had some proclivity for Kung Fu. Later as I grew up and particularly after the Tiananmen incident in 1989 and the publication of Jung Chang's *Wild Swans* (first published in 1991), I became acutely aware of new stereotypes which floated across western media – and which still persist today. These typecasts were often much more pernicious in that China was consistently portrayed in neo-Orwellian terms as a country with a totalitarian government which unswervingly monitored and regulated its people, their habits and lifestyles. In this regard, another degrading and persisting stereotype of Chinese society emerged which seemed to typecast all Chinese people as the brain washed victims of a government more interested in control and order than singular human expression. Connected to these social pigeonholes there was also an implicit *economic stereotype* which targeted Chinese consumer products and the Chinese economy more generally as a site of uniformity and utilitarian mass production. As opposed to a place of workmanship, craftsmanship or even creativity (and indeed Taiwan is included in this stereotype)

China was often portrayed as that 'far away' place where cheap and poorly made consumables were constructed and exported.

As a child of the 80s from a lower middle class background, I was lucky enough to receive many of these consumables in the form of plastic toys, regular objects, utensils and even clothes that would often bear the trade mark of 'Made in China' or 'Made in Taiwan'. Much later, when I approached early adulthood in the 1990s, I discovered that actually the 'Made in China' and/or the 'Made in Taiwan' brand could sometimes prompt sneers and/or laughter from friends and acquaintances (myself included; I was not above it). The 'Made in China' or 'Made in Taiwan' label simply meant cheap and mass produced goods which might serve some kind of short term goal – such as a plastic picnic set for example – and which rarely said anything about quality or even craftsmanship. In this regard, certainly these economic consumables further compounded the social stereotypes which positioned China as a nation of homogenous people who were utilitarian, characterless and uncreative (even if these same products bought great joy to spoilt children like myself who were fortunate enough to receive plastic Star Wars action figures for Christmas – such as the vintage Kenner Star Wars figures that were mainly produced in Hong Kong and Taiwan).

More recently, even in some critically acclaimed feature length documentaries these stereotypes remain unchallenged. Thus, in *Manufactured Landscapes* (2006), a movie which seeks to capture the artistic work of the photographer Edward Burtynsky, unintentionally a homogenous picture of Chinese people and their economic circumstances are reproduced once again (I say unintentionally because I believe the film makers are highly critical, thoughtful and sensitive film makers). Indeed, during the opening scene of this documentary, Jennifer Baichwal (who is the director) begins her film with a tracking shot that seeks to capture the vast size and breadth of 'the Cankun Factory in Xiamen City, Fujian'; a factory so big that it has been said to be of the equivalent 'size of four football fields' (Smith, 2007). In this inaugural scene, the tracking shot takes us past endless 'work stations of employees meticulously assembling some minuscule unit to be fitted into

an espresso machine' (Smith, 2007). Of course, whilst this documentary does undeniably capture one aspect of Chinese life and indeed the economy, arguably the movie feels quite removed from the lives of Chinese people. Thus, when Baichwal's opening shot of the factory workers floats over these people at their work stations, we get little sense of their everyday world, their everyday experiences, their loved ones, their hobbies and indeed their individual personalities.

Furthermore in recent years, perceptibly western media has also seemed to repeatedly focus on the militaristic production of Chinese athletes – such as the famous basketball player Yao Ming. Of course although undoubtedly some Chinese athletes have indeed been put under pressure by the post-Maoist state, the continual reference to these more Orwellian sounding conditions, once again, ignores the profound, complex and rich life circumstances that Chinese athletes face. In short, as many interlocutors are continually pointing out, life in China today is dramatically different to the lives of those people who lived through the early days of the PRC and the Cultural Revolution; in this respect, although life has shifted in China, it would appear that for many people within the western media traditional stereotypes die hard. There are however, occasional exceptions to the rule. In the last few days then, during coverage of the Olympics, interestingly the BBC noted the 'expressive' nature of one of the Chinese athlete's: Fu Yuanhui. On the 10th of August, 2016, the BBC ran an online article describing Swimmer Fu Yuanhui as 'a disarming and expressive Olympic swimming star' (BBC, 2016); moreover, as reports attest Fu Yuanhui seems to have attracted a vast fan club some of whom are certainly not Chinese. In this regard, with the rise of China on the world stage and the increasing rise of western tourism to the mainland, arguably many of the classic reductive, deterministic and sometimes even racist stereotypes concerning Chinese identity are being increasingly unsettled.

Unsettling 'Made in China': a picture of everyday life and craftsmanship.

With these sociological representations in mind, in 2013 I had the fortune to meet a young Chinese Australian film maker called Nathan Yun completely by accident in the North Western Chinese city of Xi'an. At this time, I was desperate for some help with a series of sociological projects into the planning and development system in Xi'an, and so I quickly hassled Nathan and asked him to give me a hand with a series of qualitative sociological interviews. In return, I agreed to assist Nathan with the development of the translation of a documentary movie that he told me he was working on. Having helped me with my research I was, of course, absolutely indebted to helping Nathan with his own film-project that was entitled 'Kite Zhang's Kites' (at this point we also had become firm friends). After returning to Britain in August 2013, I had little contact with Nathan until he came to stay with my wife and I in December 2013 before he ventured off to take a small holiday tour of Europe. At this point then, I had absolutely no idea or expectations regarding Nathan's documentary movie project. But when I eventually saw a trailer and then a draft of the movie in the spring and summer of 2014 (if I remember rightly?) I was absolutely transfixed by the style, the quality, and the narrative which Nathan sought to evoke.

Briefly speaking, Nathan's film is an 85 minute documentary film that explores the life of Mr Zhang, a native of Xi'an who has been creating *unique kites* for most of his life. What is different about Mr Zhang's kites is that they are kinetic and have moving parts whilst airborne. As well as exploring the craftsmanship of Zhang's kites, Nathan's movie seeks to indirectly tap into broader themes regarding culture, crafts and heritage in China. In this respect, as we explore Mr Zhang's work, we also come to know his history and his continual struggle to maintain his art in a life that has seen the Cultural Revolution, financial hardship and shifts in Chinese culture (and the economy) more generally. The film contains interviews with people in and around Mr Zhang's life and family and also includes dialogues with a very amicable curator at Xi'an's intangible heritage museum/institute. Most importantly, the film also contains many short interviews with everyday Chinese people.

Ostensibly, this movie is about an old Chinese man who is struggling to pass on his art to a future generation. As the film develops it becomes clear that Mr Zhang is very unhappy with his current apprentice and fears for the loss of his art which amounts to a form of intangible cultural heritage – indeed, as I understand Mr Zhang is actually given a small stipend by the local government in Xi'an to maintain his art. However, another look at the movie reveals a series of themes and life experiences that completely challenges the extremely tired western stereotyping of China (and Chinese people) that I have discussed above. Importantly, against the usual narrative of a homogenous economic world of mass production, Nathan's movie explores the craftsmanship of Mr Zhang's work and specifically Nathan draws our attention to the slow and meticulous process of kinetic kite making. Here the movie rightly congratulates Mr Zhang's practical skills and his ability to shape and forge materials – and his use of miniature tools – in the production of the kites.

But interestingly, the movie also takes us past issues around craftsmanship and brings us into Mr Zhang's home life where the relationships that exist within his family are unwittingly explored. At times then, the movie tells us a lot about Mr Zhang's wife and the way she has often felt bored, frustrated and even frightened by her husband's relentless pursuit of kinetic kite making. Thus, in one part of the film we learn that Mrs Zhang was especially concerned by her husband's manufacture and production of the kites during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). As Mrs Zhang points out she was worried that because of their family background – as land owners – her husband's kite making could be considered 'rightist' and 'bourgeois' leading to imprisonment or something even worse. Consequently, when I eventually showed Nathan's movie to a domestic and academic audience at Newcastle University, (April, 2016) I was not surprised to find that the movie provoked both laughter and sagaciousness. Indeed, at times the audience often laughed (not in a condescending way of course) at Mrs Zhang's marital frustrations. But at other moments, it was very clear, especially during a post-movie discussion, that the documentary had provoked a great deal of intellectual reflection amongst our audience.

All in all, then, I believe that Mr Nathan Yun's film is really important. It is important because it not only challenges the classic western stereotypes (I have discussed above), but it also gives us a deeper insight into *everyday Chinese life* and the common forms of family life that I suspect many people from around the world experience daily. When watching 'Kite Zhang's Kites' this film certainly raises many playful laughs, but then again at other times the film firmly encourages its audience to be serious and to reflect. Moreover, the film also gives us a small insight into the generational changes that have happened in China. Thus, whilst we meet the ageing Zhang and his wife, we also meet middle aged and younger Chinese people in the form of apprentices, family members and random participants. Here at times in the film, Nathan asks these younger subjects to comment upon how they feel about Mr Zhang's kites and whether they themselves would like to continue and learn about this intangible heritage. Whilst, Nathan is mainly met with negative responses, these interviews introduce us to a new age of young Chinese people who are liberal, flexible, and pragmatic and highly technologically savvy – particularly through the use of mobile and communication technology. In this way, and moving away from homogenising media representations in the west, I would argue that Nathan's documentary allows us to see that side of everyday Chinese life which is often overlooked in our current media (particularly for documentaries that are doggedly determined to continually 'uncover' the bottomless neo-Orwellian machinations of the Chinese state and the 'party'). Interestingly then after showing the movie to the Newcastle audience a common response I heard from many of the participants was that Nathan's movie was ultimately *very human*.

Finally, I suspect that the brilliance of Nathan's film, may also rest in the fact that Nathan himself has lived between Australia and China. Indeed, I would contend that Nathan has a real perception of some of the standard stereotypes that exist *within both western and Chinese audiences*. In this respect, if films can serve as cultural bridges, I would suggest that Nathan's movie

might certainly offer westerners (and perhaps even Chinese people themselves) a better understanding of the gaps and *indeed the human similarities* that exist between us.

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