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Ethical Fashion: the Human Stories driving a Fashion Movement

Abstract

This paper examines and compares two stories, the novel Helen Fleetwood (Elizabeth, 1841) and the film China Blue (Teddy Bear Films, 2005), in relation to the Ethical Fashion movement. In 2005, more than 50 designers from around the world took part in The Ethical Fashion Show in Paris. This movement dictates that designers ensure that their garments are produced in an ethical manner, rather than support the ‘sweatshop’ environments of some industrialists determined to make a profit at the expense of workers rights. The momentum of the Ethical Fashion movement suggests that it is possible for fashion to be ethical, desirable and profitable in the 21st century.

In 1841, after extensive research, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna (using the pseudonym Charlotte Elizabeth) began to write about the atrocities of the factory system in industrialised England. Her novel, Helen Fleetwood, is one of the earliest examples of this kind of work, providing the reader with an extensive insight into the life of English factory workers in the mid-19th century. The story is about the Widow Green and her orphan dependents who are led, through circumstance, to leave their rural home and take up employment in the cotton mills of Manchester, with the hope of having an independent existence. Instead they discover the realities of factory life – extremely long hours, unsafe conditions, poor wages and a steady decline into extreme poverty.

In his film China Blue (Teddy Bear Films, 2005), director Micha X. Peled tells an alarmingly similar tale set in 21st century China. This ‘docu-drama’ (a recreation from actual interviews and diary entries) tells the story of ‘Little Jasmine’ who leaves her family’s farm to pursue an independent life in Southern China’s manufacturing district. It is not long before the realities of
modern factory life are revealed to the teenage ‘heroine’ – crowded dormitories, long working hours, arbitrary fines and wages that do not compare with those of workers in the Western world.

While much of the human story remains unchanged, there have been significant improvements in technology and safety in the last 165 years that result in the reality that not all clothing manufacture is performed in ‘sweatshop’ conditions. After a recent visit to a manufacturing plant in China, consultation with peers in the industry and having worked in the Australian fashion industry for many years, the author compares these stories with her own experiences.

Introduction

At the same time as fashion designers exhibited their collections at The Ethical Fashion Show® in Paris, Micha X. Peled was putting the finishing touches to his film ‘China Blue’ (Teddy Bear Films, 2005). Released in cinemas in 2006, the film tells the story of a young Chinese girl who moves from the family farm to pursue employment in one of China’s many clothing manufacturing plants. This film is the most recent example of a compelling story about the cruelties of factory life. Western audiences have been captivated with the everyday horrors of working life in a Chinese factory, a life so different to their own. One of the earliest examples of a detailed account of life in the factories of England during the Industrial Revolution is the novel ‘Helen Fleetwood’ (Elizabeth, Charlotte. 1848), written 160 years earlier than ‘China Blue’. The stories have many similarities that identify unethical practices within the factory system that exist despite the differences in geographic location and time. If little progress has been made in
improving workers rights over such a long period of time, what is the future for the Ethical Fashion movement?

**Ethical Eco-Fashion**

The Ethical Fashion Show® is one of many vehicles used to promote fashion clothing. The organization provides designers with a set of conditions that must be met in order for them to take part in the shows each year. The guidelines for the 2007 shows include a requirement that the clothing be produced by companies that abide by current labour regulations in the region of production or are created using textiles that are environmentally friendly. ¹ In Australia, the Fair Wear® organisation offers designers recognition for producing ‘No Sweatshop’ clothing, and the rights to attach fair wear ticketing to finished goods.² In London, the fringe fashion week event ‘Re-Fashion’ centres on the re-use of fashion and textiles to create new fashion with a view to deal with the abysmal waste of textiles and clothing in the ‘throw away’ fashion environment, a hidden by product of the inexpensiveness of mainstream fashion clothing. In common are the guidelines that purport to support the use of manufacturers that employ fair labour standards.

The definition of fair labour standards, while straightforward when dealing with the labour laws of one country, is not as simple when dealing with a global economy. Some

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developing countries are still in the process of adopting labour laws. Others have laws and conditions that fall far below what an Australian may consider to be ethical standards. There are, however, a set of conditions that define a sweatshop. These conditions are in evidence in the stories of workers from the early 19\textsuperscript{th} century to current times.

\textit{The Rural Idyll}

Each story begins with life on the farm. The heroines are living a rural existence taking part in an everyday life of caring for crops or animals. The family home is small and comfortably overcrowded or has been leased and the lease has expired. A family friend or trusted acquaintance encourages the heroine to believe in the benefits of taking a job in the factories. Cash wages in return for labour appear to be a great incentive and offer the potential worker an idea of being able to improve their lives through earning enough money to get ahead.

In the 19\textsuperscript{th} century novel, Mrs Green is a widow with her 3 grandchildren and the adopted Helen Fleetwood in her care, after the death of her eldest grandson the lease of their cottage is expired. With no home and no income the family would have to take up work in the factories or be at the mercy of the local workhouse. The author describes the workhouse in the opening chapters of the novel thus:

\begin{quote}
\textit{About a mile distant from the widow’s cottage, hard by the school, and not far from the village church, stood that truly national edifice, the workhouse.}
\textit{(Charlotte Elizabeth, 1848. p.17)}
\end{quote}

The thought of people in these times was that the workhouse was the worst fate that could befall a person. The workhouses of 19\textsuperscript{th} century England were run by the parish and were
used as a means for the impoverished to earn charity such as shelter and food. Prior to 1834, relief had been provided to families suffering hardship in their own homes through the provision of food and small monetary amounts. The Poor Law Amendment Act (1834) meant that the poor had to live in the workhouse for aid to be granted. Residents were provided with thin gruel and had to wear the uniform provided. Accommodations at the workhouse were dormitory style. Women, men, children and the infirm were allocated to separate dormitories, not conducive to maintaining close family relations. The work for the able bodied consisted of mindless tasks such as breaking up stones or unravelling ropes. ³

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**Child Labour**

The legal age for children to take up full time work in Australia is 14 years and 9 months. In China, the legal age is 16 years.⁴ Children in Canada and New Jersey can legally work from the age of 12 years. In the time of Helen Fleetwood, The Factory Acts of the British Parliament (1833) had been enacted to help protect the rights of workers in the textile factories. The novel addresses most areas of the act in an effort to highlight that the law was ineffective in protecting those rights. The act decreed that children had to be 9 years of age in order to work in the textiles industry, unless they worked in silk mills. A surgeon’s certificate was also required to verify that a child was fit for the tasks that would be assigned to a child of this age. In 1844, an amendment to the Factory Act

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prohibited children from working longer than a 10 hour day, and no longer than 46 hours a week. Children were also required to attend school for a set amount of time per week (2 hours per day for children aged 9-13 years).

Through the fictional story of Helen Fleetwood many sympathetic female readers in the middle and upper classes of the mid 19th century, were made aware of the plight of factory workers and the ways in which factory owners were working around the laws to enable them to continue in their practice of hiring child labour. Examples include scenes of the ‘schooling’ system; one of Mrs Green’s grandchildren (too young to work in the factories) was sent to work in the silk mills; and the willingness of the factories’ agent to encourage Mrs Green to lie about the ages of her grand daughter to the surgeon, so that she would be certified at over 13 years, meaning a full shift as opposed to a child’s work allocation.

In reality, potential factory workers simply lie about their ages in order to gain employment. Liping, one of the characters in the film ‘China Blue’, is a fourteen year old girl who has gained official employment in the factory. In China she would be classed as a child and is not permitted to work. Her age would have been entered in the register at 16 years. The main character in the film, Jasmine, is 17 years old and as such is legally able to work.

**Acceptable Working Hours**

The workers in the Lifeng factory are required to work 12-14 hour shifts, 7 days a week. This calculates to a working week of between 84 and 98 hours. These hours seem to vary
greatly when there is a deadline to be met. Some scenes in the movie include examples of workers working ‘around the clock’ to meet deadlines. Some shifts are 17 hours, allowing workers only a few hours of sleep before their return to the factory floor.

The current laws of the People’s Republic of China prescribe an 8 hour day, 40 hour week for workers.

“… 44 hours of work each week for employees in all enterprises, state bodies and public institutions within the territory of the People’s Republic of China. The 44 hours limit may be extended in special circumstances… The amended text of 1995 provides for a 40-hour regular work week.” (People’s Republic of China, 1994)

Despite having these laws to protect workers, it is obvious from the film that the laws are not being adhered to or enforced. Records must be falsified to protect the employer from prosecution or the “special circumstances” included in the regulations must be in effect in the Lifeng factory.

These hours do not vary greatly from the hours of work required by our heroines in the 19th century. Factory hours were from 6 am to 6 pm in the summer and 7 am to 7 pm in the winter, with 1 ½ hours for meal breaks. The maximum number of hours to be worked in a day was 12 hours. Women and children could only work for 9 hours on Sunday. By 1850, the law was updated to state that all work would cease by 2 pm on Saturday and the maximum hours of work for a week could be not greater than 60 hours. This extract from the novel highlights the practice of falsifying records to avoid prosecution by the inspectors:

“…time books were kept so unfairly that they made it look just as they chose; and you may be sure neither a superintendent nor inspector had leisure enough to

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search out the roguery; particularly as they took good care to go on correctly for a couple of weeks before the visit; and whatever had happened beyond that time was out of the reach of punishment…” (Elizabeth, Charlotte. 1848. p. 153)

In both cases the law exists to provide some protection for the rights of workers. However, the ability for governments to enforce these laws was and is still limited.

**Factory Inspectors**

In both the 19th and 21st centuries a key stumbling block to ensuring the safety of workers appears to be the system of Factory inspectors. The Factory Act of 1844 stipulates the employment of 4 factory inspectors to undertake the task of taking necessary steps to enforce the act. Factory owners caught in practices that defied the act were fined between £2 and £5. A factory inspector’s work is described eloquently in the novel:

“...our inspector’s district includes the county of Lancaster, the county of Northumberland, the county of Cumberland, of Westmoreland, of Durham and two ridings of the pretty little county of York....
....The number of mills that he has to superintend is about eighteen hundred. Now there are little more that three hundred days to a year, leaving out Sundays and holidays; the inspector’s district lies spread over many hundred miles of country; the mills are greatly scattered, may being in villages, and on little streams in remote places; and so you may judge what time the gentleman has to look after every one of them.” (Elizabeth, Charlotte. p.148)

A large part of the novel is dedicated to the ineffectiveness of the system of inspectors and magistrates in upholding the rights of workers under the Factory Act. The fines were often unchallenged and readily paid as the cost was minimal when compared to the extra production achieved at the expense of the quality of life of their workforce.

The inspectors had their hands tied through a series of difficulties arising from the regulations under which they worked. All infringements must be prosecuted within
fourteen days of an incident having occurred, hence the reference to an act being out of
the reach of punishment. A reference is included by Elizabeth Charlotte in the novel to
comments made by an inspector in 1840.

“… ‘...If every section of the law had been violated on the 17th of January, and I
go to the mill on the 1st of February, I cannot touch him.’-Vide. Evidence of
Leonard Horner, Esq., Inspector, given on oath before the Committee of the
House of Commons, March 11, 1840.” (Elizabeth, Charlotte. 1848. p. 151)

This reference provides an important link to the research undertaken by the author in her
preparation of the novel. Leonard Horner, Esq. was very eloquent in communicating the
frustration that was felt be factory inspectors in their complete inability to perform their
work effectively.

In the United State today there are 1000 inspectors employed by the Department of
Labour. These inspectors are responsible to enforcing US Labour Laws in approximately
6 million registered work places.\textsuperscript{6} This is 1 inspector for 6000 workplaces, meaning that
the inspectors of today are responsible for 3.33 times the number of workplaces as their
19\textsuperscript{th} century equivalents.

\textbf{Unsafe working Conditions}

Unsafe working conditions are an essential characteristic of a sweatshop environment.
The mental and physical injuries inflicted on workers in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century factory system
are thankfully absent from the 21\textsuperscript{st} century version, shown in ‘\textit{China Blue’}. The
characters we meet in the film are overworked and underpaid but still have the spirit to
laugh and enjoy the life that they are leading, unlike the characters in \textit{Helen Fleetwood}.

As the novel progresses the decline in the mental state of the characters is obvious. Despite being forced to leave their friends and home and travel a great distance to enter into factory life the widow and her family are hopeful that they can make a new life. Even as the dreadful condition of factory life become apparent, they put their faith in their god and continue to find any positive that exists. Eventually, despite this faith, their lives become those of drudgery and suffering.

At the outset of the novel we are introduced to the Wrights, the family of Mrs Green daughter who have all worked in the factories for some time. The Wrights have a child that has been badly maimed in the mill. Here, a neighbour of the Wrights’ explains to the widow how the child became disabled.

…she was worked until her ankles (sic) bent under her; and if Mrs Wright was not your daughter, I would say it was an infamous shame to let the child continue going, after she got so weak and ill. However, the machinery settled the matter by pulling off her arm.” (Elizabeth, Charlotte. 1848. p. 155)

There are three important concerns raised in this one piece of writing. These are; the unnatural deformity of the young bodies resulting from repeated overwork in cramped conditions, the inaction of parents in regard to protecting their children from the hazard of working in the factories and the physical danger of the machinery being used by child labourers. There is one other passage from the novel that is graphic in the description of the lack of safety afforded to workers in the spinning mills. It described the task required of the very young girls that worked alongside Mrs Green’s granddaughter, Mary, in the spinning room. Mary has been put to work as a piecener in the factory and is having the task of the scavengers explained to her.
“...bits of cotton wool will stick to the thread, and they mustn’t go on the reels; so there is a little girl huddled up under the frame and she snatches off all the loose wool, and throws it down so fast! and when the machine runs back, if the little scavenger did not bob and duck, and get very low; she would have a fine knock on the head.” (Elizabeth, Charlotte. 1848, p. 86)

This is just one example of the unsafe practices that existed in early factories. The Lifeng factory in China, despite having many other faults, did not have dirty, cramped working spaces and dangerous machinery. Considering that most other conditions that are representative of a sweatshop exist here, it is unlikely that the cleanliness has resulted for any other reason than to keep the clothing clean and undamaged as it passed through the factory. In the 21st century production machinery is designed to be safer to use. Although not evidenced in this film, there is a short film available on the Internet entitled “Those with Justice” (Students and Academics against Corporate Misbehaviour, 2005). The film includes interviews with workers at the Hung Hing Printing Company in Shenzhen, China (the same place as the Lifeng factory) where Disney books are printed. One worker describes an injury suffered to his hand. The injury was a result of workers being required to work book binding machinery without the safety guards in place, as they slow the job down.7

Arbitrary Fines and Drug Use

The application of arbitrary fines to workers pay is also characteristic of factories that fail to observe workers rights. Unfortunately, the practice is still observed as evidenced in the film. Two of the employees are ‘docked’ the equivalent of several days pay after they are caught for sneaking out of the factory on night shift. They leave the factory to obtain some ‘energy tea’. In this case the tea is probably just sweetened, hot tea - a small treat to

keep them going for the rest of their working shift. In the 19th century novel, the youngest grandson of Mrs Green has been associating with a bad group of boys at the silk mills. They have been frequenting the gin shop after a long, hard day’s work. The granddaughter Mary is putting the family in further peril to a point where they are unable to pay their rent and are on the verge of being evicted. She is having much of her pay held back to pay fines for answering back and laughing.

**Union Bans**

Although it is illegal for workers to hold strikes in China, the factory workers at Lifeng threaten to strike. Surprisingly, it seems that the workers continued to work on an urgent order even though they had not been paid. An agreement is reached between the workers and Mr Lam, the factory owner, whereby the workers agree to work all night to finish the order and management agree to pay the outstanding wages the following day. The workers are aware of the fact that the company profits are derived from their labour and the withholding of that labour, although risky, provides them with a small amount of leverage with management.

There were no unions for textile workers in the early 19th century. This passage described the kinds of rebellious action that some in the manufactories were considering.

“…it is too probable that the cruel neglect of the British government as concerns those employed in the manufactories, to which her commercial prosperity is mainly owing, will yet recoil on themselves in some terrible outbreak, aided by those who are made desperate by oppression, and utterly careless as to future consequences, because they have been left in ignorance and unbelief…”

(Elizabeth, Charlotte. 1848. p. 251)
While there were no laws to make strikes illegal, this passage confirms the idea that ‘rebellious actions’ were considered unchristian. It should be noted that factory workers had staged ‘machine destroying’ riots prior to this time. While these workers understood that profit was derived from their labour, they did not yet understand the process of striking to force negotiation with management.

Making unions illegal will not stop workers from eventually uniting to improve their working conditions, when those working conditions become intolerable. In the case of the Lifeng workers, it appears that they can endure much hardship in terms of long hours and cramped living conditions but were unwilling to work without pay.

**Human Machines**

Garments manufacturing lends itself to piecework, a practice which involves individual workers completing the same small section on a large number of garments. This method is known to increase the rate at which goods are produced as workers naturally develop faster ways of completing the set tasks. Workers are often paid for their work by the piece, i.e. the more pieces of work that are completed the higher the amount of money each worker is paid. The great advantage of this system in developing countries is that unskilled workers can be easily trained in this style of process work. The disadvantage of such as system, as recognised in Western countries, is the increased risk of physical injury through repetitive strain and mental injury through increased feelings of worthlessness and depression.
In the film, Jasmine finds employment as a thread clipper. She is allocated a set time to clip the thread from each pair of Jeans that are put on her cutting table. If she can cut the threads on more pairs than the allocation she is paid more money. It is a very boring job and physically difficult as denim is very heavy and she must turn the jeans inside out to ensure that all the threads are trimmed correctly. If they are not trimmed, the work is returned to her and she must double handle the garment. This costs Lefing and Jasmine both time and money.

**Unethical manufacturing of fashion in Australia**

Unfortunately, Australia has been unable to prevent the use of sweatshop labour. Government regulations exist to prevent the abuse of home sewers through various checks and balances required by law. Out workers in Australia must be paid the same minimum hourly rate as factory workers and be provided with work cover and superannuation, a great improvement in the last 10-15 years. However, it appears that the more the government regulates the employment of outworkers the less the workers are paid or protected. The extra administration simply adds another layer to the system of sweatshops. This kind of work is usually performed by new immigrants who do not speak English very well, if at all. Some home sewers are receiving full welfare benefits and do not want to be paid ‘on the books’, making them even more susceptible to unscrupulous operators who act as middlemen between the legitimate rates paid by companies attempting to do the right thing.
As this is written, school uniforms in Brisbane are being produced by workers paid as little as AU$3.00 per hour.\footnote{Queensland Sweatshops churn out School uniforms.( January 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 2007). The Age. Last accessed 21/04/2007 from http://theage.com.au/} This is a cash rate. Workers who work in their own homes are given no consideration for overheads such as electricity, rent of floor space or maintenance of machinery. Their working environments are often in the garage or under the house. Lighting is poor, conditions can be dirty and cramped, electrical safety would be an issue. Children are required to assist their parents with ‘the job’. Their tasks include; translating for their parents, attaching interfacing using fusing presses, ticketing and bagging finished goods and in some cases preparing paperwork for invoicing. The Queensland branch of the Textiles, Clothing and Footwear Union “…had taken 40 Queensland-based employers to the Federal Court for non-compliance in the last 12 months and 36 employers had settled out of court to keep their names from being publicised he (Mr Morrell) said.” (The Age, January 7\textsuperscript{th}, 2007)

**Ethical manufacturing of fashion in China**

In the same way that examples of sweatshops can be found in our own backyard, examples of ethical manufacturing can be found in China. There are some manufacturing plants in China that are genuinely trying to improve workers conditions. FBC Ltd\footnote{The name of this company has been changed to protect Trade Secrets.} is one such company. A visit to their plant highlighted some of the preconceived ideas that can develop about what a factory in China looks like. This was a large factory employing over 1000 employees. The complex is surrounded by security fencing and has security guards at the gate. The factory building is very modern. The workers seemed happy and involved. The individual workspaces were large and well lit. The factory was very clean.
and tidy (even the floors were thread free). The machinery including CAD systems were all in good working order. There was also potential for employees to achieve promotion through hard work. The Designer who organised the factory tour had started work in the factory as a junior. She currently lives in Hong Kong and manages a large client base of customers throughout the world. This company produces very high quality Bridal and Evening wear and due to the quality of the goods can command higher prices for their work. Could this be the future of Chinese manufacturing, an honest day’s work for an honest day’s pay?

Conclusion

Ethical Fashion, while a good idea in theory, is unlikely to exist. In reality, mainstream fashion is where the real damage is done to the workforces of developing countries and to the environment. The less expensive that fashion becomes the more disposable it is, and the more damage it does. The inexpensiveness of mainstream fashion not only makes it disposable, it instigates the need for workers in developed countries to sacrifice their rights in order to compete with their off shore counterparts. It is interesting to note that while the Re-Fashion event in London was well supported, not a single invitation was accepted by the fashion buyers from London’s boutiques and Department Stores.\(^{10}\) Without widespread commercial success the Ethical Fashion Movement is relegated to existing as a fringe movement having little effect in changing the way consumers vote with their spending dollars. This concept is put succinctly by Davit Hieatt, the founder of

Howies®, an eco company focused on providing the mainstream surf market with more ethical fashion options.

“The only zero impact company is a bankrupt one...but we want to make the lowest impact possible. The worst thing you can do is make stuff no one wants to buy.”

The key to affecting real change in the ethical production of fashion is in large scale companies making commitments to improve the way in which mainstream fashion is produced. The Ethical Fashion Movement is useful to spark an interest at consumer level about the negative effects of clothing production on society and the environment, but does not have the market share to impact on the actual effects produced by the clothing market. If “Ethical Clothing” became a serious market trend, perhaps the world would become a better place. At a time when the international ‘Make Poverty History’ organisation has their signature armbands produced in sweatshops, it is possible that Ethical Fashion is a modern fairytale.

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11 Ibid.
References


