



INSTITUTION FÖR GLOBALA STUDIER

# “I HAD A STICK WITH A WHEEL ON IT, NOW IT’S ALL MADE IN CHINA”

A qualitative study of “Made in China” toys in Poland

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# Abstract

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This study focuses on families' ideas and experiences of "Made in China" toys in Poland. One month of fieldwork with three families allowed for in-depth qualitative data to be collected through informal as well as formal semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The data was largely interpreted in terms of globalisation, the acceleration of which leads to *disembedding*, as Anthony Giddens illustrates in *The Consequences of Modernity*. In particular, the issue of trust is discussed, and is related to how the families accessed information. Mary Douglas' idea of *matter out of place* is used to discuss the sense of foreignness some participants felt towards the idea of "Made in China" toys, for instance associating them with strong smells.

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## Introduction

“Made in China” is a label most people, if not everyone, has come across many times during his or her lifetime. We often see toys made in Indonesia, Thailand and so on, but the first country that would always be mentioned during my fieldwork was China. As if it was somehow representative of the entire production of things, especially the relatively cheap items we come in contact with on a daily basis. This study will investigate the impact of globalisation in the everyday life of three families in Poland which, through participant observation and interviews, will be exemplified through their ideas regarding toys, especially toys that have been made in China.

What sparked my interest in the topic was a curiosity about whether people actually think about “Made in China”, and if so, in what ways, or whether it is something that goes unnoticed. Considering the taken-for-grantedness of the label, I thought it would be interesting to bring it to people’s attention and see what reactions would arise. If they do think about it, what do they think? What can these ideas or sentiments reveal about experiences of globalisation, or more specifically, of disembedding? Furthermore, I was inspired by a fairly recent article about the new Silk Road Economic Belt, a relatively recent infrastructure making Poland the “gateway for China” to Europe (Davies, C. 2016). This seemed especially significant considering that Poland is still a developing economy (Palonka 2010: 370). Initially, I had hoped to focus on products that were actually transported via the newly constructed railway system, but this information was not easily attainable. Additionally, the array of products was far too broad and I was startled by the ubiquity of “Made in China”, uncertain of where to start. Eventually, I settled on the idea of investigating families’ ideas about children’s toys made in China so as to delimit the topic, and because the families participating in the study all happened to have young children.

## Background

Can we tell whether or not a toy is made in China judging from its appearance? I cannot recall looking for the “Made in ...” label everytime I purchase toys, nor do I see any obvious differences between them. Many toys among all three families were gifts from family members and friends and, as a result, parents do not always have complete control over their children’s material possessions. Supermarkets are filled with toys, TV channels are loaded with toy advertisements, and primary schools make use of playing with toys as part of education. When giving a presentation on China at an elementary school near a countryside in Poland, I asked the children what they think of first when they hear ‘China’, and to my surprise most of the children shouted “toys!” – as if toys were widely recognised as being “Made in China”. I was curious of whether this was the case among individual families.

## Aim and research questions

In today’s globalised world, the origin of things we use on a daily basis is often taken for granted, but what happens when we bring it to our attention? This study aims to look into the relationship between what family members say about children’s toys and their attitudes towards toys that are “Made in China”.

The research questions are as follows:

- What ideas, sentiments and values do family members express regarding shopping for children’s toys?
- How do the children experience the toys according to their family members?
- Is the label “Made in China” significant for the above, and if so, how can theories on globalisation help us understand how it is made sense of?

## Theoretical framework

How the “Made in China” toys are brought up by participants in this fieldwork will be analysed in relation to the increasingly globalised world using Giddens’ term, *disembedding*. Mary Douglas’ concept of pollution as *matter out of place* will provide a theoretical framework for analysing family members’ decision-making when purchasing toys, as well as

their thoughts about “Made in China” toys the families already possess. These theoretical standpoints will come together to allow for an analysis of the relationship between the families’ ideas about toys and the attitudes expressed concerning globalisation.

Anthony Giddens in *The Consequences of Modernity* defines disembedding as “the lifting out” of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space” (1991: 21). A prime condition of disembedding involves time-space distancing, “the conditions under which time and space are organised so as to connect presence and absence” (ibid. 1991: 14). This allows for disembedding mechanisms to take place – Giddens distinguishes between two types: *symbolic tokens* or “media of interchange”, such as money (1991: 22), and *expert systems* defined as “systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organise large areas of the material and social environment in which we live today” (1991: 27). Both mechanisms involve *trust* which emanates from “faith in the reliability of a person or system” (ibid. 1991: 33). Thoughts surrounding “Made in China” toys will be used to analyse *trust* expressed towards disembedding mechanisms relating to China.

According to Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger*, we must first confront our own ideas of contagion before we can understand others’ (1966: 29). Essentially, Douglas means there is no accurate way of generalising pollution, since it exists “in the eye of the beholder” (1966: 2). Douglas’ concept of pollution will be used to focus around the classification of toys: “... our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications” (1966: 37). Foreignness is ultimately experienced as *outside* our pattern of classification, thereby being *out of place* (ibid. 1966: 41). When a foreign object is deemed contagious to the human body, it is thought to trespass bodily boundaries and impose a threat of potential danger (ibid. 1966: 116), as does the idea of toxic chemicals found in plastic toys. Douglas mentions that pollution is often justified by the idea of danger, which modern people do not experience very differently from the Bushmen since, “Both we and the Bushmen justify our pollution avoidances by fear of danger”(1966: 70). In the same way, our pollution behaviour is imbued with symbolic meaning, “The real difference is that we do not bring forward from one context to the next the same set of ever more powerful symbols: our experience is fragmented” (1966: 70). She means that modern societies are differentiated, while so-called “primitive cultures” are

undifferentiated. This means that modern cultures demand special expertise in each field of knowledge (ibid. 1966: 79).

Significantly, Douglas' reference to differentiated expertise in modern society and Giddens' *expert systems* both relate to Émile Durkheim's idea of *organic solidarity*, that is "created through mutual dependence, which occurs when there is a complex division of labor and people following different occupations come to rely on one another" (Moberg 2013: 50). Furthermore, Giddens' *trust* exists in "environments of risk" where there are different levels of securities against danger (1991: 54), thus we depend on trust to avoid risk. This variety of securities against dangers, which exists in form of disembedded mechanisms, means minimising the potential of danger – potential implies future orientation which is inherent to disembedding mechanisms (ibid. 1991: 51). The study is partly concerned with what participants take into account in terms of this future orientation, or *expectation*, especially considering potential risks and dangers which either are or are not believed to exist in the acquirement of "Made in China" toys. Giddens states that "the nature of modern institutions is deeply bound up with mechanisms of trust in abstract systems, especially trust in expert systems" (1991: 83). He refers to *faceless commitments*, which is one such 'abstract system', and "concerns the development of faith in symbolic tokens or expert systems" (ibid.). The focus on faceless commitments will consider Giddens' question on trust and expertise, "why do most people, most of the time, trust in practices and social mechanisms about which their own technical knowledge is slight or nonexistent?" (1991: 88). Furthermore, where trust is hampered by either the stigma of "Made in China" as unacceptable and of low quality, or its interference of body boundaries, I will refer to *matter out of place*.

## Previous Research

The approach to this study will be inspired by Alison Hulme's study (2015) on bargain store items from China, while also drawing on similarities to Helene Brembeck's study (2013) on mothers' managing of excess 'baby stuff'.

Alison Hulme analyses people's relationships to bargain store items that made their way from China to the homes of consumers in Europe and North America (2015). She

mentions the shift in emphasis from productivist to consumerist society (Hulme 2015: 91), and the instantaneous culture of consumption in the modern world (ibid. 2015: 96). Furthermore, she links immediacy with a notion of ‘consumer freedom’ and mentions a ‘promise of new novelty’ in terms of the transience of things (ibid. 2015: 96). “Made in China” toys are known to be cheap, and were among some of the bargain store items Hulme’s informants mentioned (2015: 90). Ideas about how informants relate to the toys will be analysed from a similar local-versus-global perspective.

Helene Brembeck’s *Managing inflows, throughflows and outflows: mothers navigating the baby stuff scape in Coping with Excess: How Organizations, Communities and Individuals Manage Overflows* takes an anthropological perspective on how children’s things are managed by mothers in Sweden (2013: 213). Taking a similar approach to this study in investigating the decision-making involved in acquiring children’s possessions, including toys, Brembeck’s data also reveals symbolic meanings involved in choosing particular objects, as well as avoiding certain products in terms of ‘filtering’ (2013: 198). The approach of this study differs in that the “Made in China” label will be brought up as a conversation starter on a matter otherwise taken for granted – namely that the toy had been made in China.

## Method

Participant observation, semi-structured, formal interviews as well as informal interviews were used as methods for collecting data.

The fieldwork was carried out in Poland, from November 14<sup>th</sup> to December 19<sup>th</sup>. Just before Christmas, it was a good opportunity to investigate the subject of toys and shopping. Participants were three families, all of whom were friends, the implications of which I am aware of and discuss under ‘ethical considerations’. Two of the families lived in the city of Łódź and one family lived in the countryside.

Many participants did not live with the children, thus the settings and situations in which interviews and observations took place varied. Since participant observation requires the use of local language and dialect (DeWalt & DeWalt 2011: 5), all communication was in Polish, and I am responsible for translating all fieldwork material from Polish to English.

Participant observation requires the researcher to take part as well as observe “daily activities rituals, interactions, and events of a group as one means of learning the



explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture” (DeWalt & DeWalt 2011: 1). Spending at least several hours with each interviewee allowed for participant observation. Filming the semi-structured, formal interviews and several other scenes allowed for more in-depth observations of such tacit aspects that one might otherwise miss, just as Helene Brembeck and others demonstrated in a study of shopping routes (2015: 23).

Semi-structured, formal interviews require the researcher to somewhat control what is being said “to increase the likelihood that all topics will be covered in each interview in more or less the same way” (Dewalt & DeWalt 2011: 139), typically with a brief list of open-ended questions to guide the interview. The list of questions used in this study can be found in the appendix.

Informal interviews allow for participants to guide the interviews with only partial control by the interviewer who, on occasion, asks questions for clarification or to focus the topic (DeWalt & DeWalt 2011: 139). Asking “Where was it made?” usually focused the topic on China, with only occasional clarifications needed. Most interviews in this fieldwork were informal.

Spending time with the families allowed me to collect a considerable amount of qualitative data, including the family members’ occupations, hobbies, habits, conversations and other daily occurrences. The time spent with each family depended on the amount of information available as well as informants’ availability. Semi-structured interviews were recorded on camera, and one conversation was recorded using a sound recorder, however most of the informal interviews were noted down on-the-go. Not all members were comfortable with formal interviews, but those who did consent had no trouble being filmed during interviews. There was a total of eight semi-structured formal interviews, however the number of participants for each family depended on how many family members were available and willing to participate. Though there were around eighteen individuals whom I had informal interviews with, these were mainly conversations carried out to obtain a deeper understanding of family relations, lifestyle and background information, as well as the use of toys, shopping habits and thoughts concerning “Made in China”. As with any qualitative research, the findings presented here are not generalisable outside the context of this study.

## Ethical considerations

Prior to this study, acquaintances in Łódź and the countryside were contacted for permission to be interviewed and conduct fieldwork, and were given a clarification of the research topic. Participants were informed that their identities would remain anonymous, and that they were free to revise all information acquired.

The city of Łódź was the only location revealed due to its relatively large population. The village in the countryside had to be anonymised due to its small size and population. Due to some sensitive information being brought up during conversations, the participants were informed of what they mentioned and were given the opportunity to either clarify or refute what they had said. Most participants were people I was already familiar with, most of whom were friends I had previously met at social gatherings, and all interviews took place in the participants' homes in Poland. One participant, Paula, became a friend of mine during the time of this fieldwork and was willing to participate. As Neal and Gordon (2001) indicate, "Perceptions of friends change with added information" ("Individual ties", para. 4), and I am aware of the potential consequences my research could have on the trust required of my informants to obtain trustworthy information (DeWalt & DeWalt 2011: 48). The research was also limited to the time I spent with each informant. Time is essential to establishing '*rapport*', which is "both an essential element in using participant observation as a tool as well as a goal of participant observation" (ibid. 2011: 47). According to Jorgenson, *rapport* requires the development of "trust and cooperation" in a situation between the researcher and everyone involved (DeWalt & DeWalt 2011: 48). By establishing friendship with most of my informants prior to this study, I assumed to have established a level of trust that would allow participants to feel comfortable in my study, which they had consented to participate in. Neal and Gordon (2001) reflect upon varying "levels of friendship" ("Individual ties", para. 4), and I considered how this could affect the information participants were willing to reveal. "What happens when the bonds of friendship mask differences of intent or aspiration?" (ibid. "Consequences for ethical research conduct" para. 4), is also a question I have been asking myself in the process of this study, and compelled me to repeatedly reexamine the relationships I had with my informants, as a *researcher*. However, the fieldwork was relatively brief, and I spent at least five hours with each informant, occasionally up to a day in total, depending on informants' availability.

The very act of conducting research on friends and people I am familiar with may affect the results since, despite a researcher's aim to obtain fuller participation, "they are always limited by being identifiably different" (DeWalt & DeWalt 2011: 32). Writing fieldnotes, for instance, became identifiable with me as a researcher, and was not something my informants were familiar with – Jean Jackson refers to the "intellectual exploitation" an anthropological fieldworker worries about when noticeably writing down fieldnotes (1990: 18). My fieldnotes often started out as headnotes, or "in the mind" (Ottenberg 1990 as cited in DeWalt & DeWalt 2011: 171), and had been written down at later occasions. Other times, fieldnotes were jotted down on my smartphone, so as to aid memory (DeWalt & DeWalt 2011:160), this was done out of convenience as well as to tone down my role as a researcher. I am aware of the 'invisibility' of smartphone usage in taking fieldnotes (Gorman 2016: 3), and thus informed participants of this method. Occasional filming or recording is also likely to affect informants' reactions, despite their consent and, as Philippe Bourgois demonstrated in his crack research, I made it clear what was being recorded (DeWalt & DeWalt 2011: 222). I also explained that the footage will not be published anywhere, and will only be used for research purposes. Any names that would be mentioned on camera had to be used, all of which were first names only. Very few names were mentioned and all family members were informed about this both before and after the interviews. Most names, all surnames and specific personal details which may reveal informants' identities is kept strictly confidential, for the sake of rapport (ibid. 2011: 219). Fictional names were used to replace most participants' real first names. Despite the camera being turned off most of the time, it was often carried around so as not to surprise anyone during interviews. I am also aware that my nonformal approach to obtaining informed consent verbally requires me to analyse the ethical considerations of any particular setting in this study (ibid. 2011: 216).

## Ethnographic Discussion

Navigating the plethora of toys found among all three families made the ubiquity of “Made in China” seem all the more pronounced. It was the taken-for-grantedness of “Made in China” that seemed so pervasive. In *Commodity futures: Labour, love and value*, Robert Foster acknowledges the increased distance between the consumer and awareness of the geography of production as a result of globalisation (2005: 8). This distance is taken into account in terms of Giddens’ disembedding in relation to “Made in China” toys, which will be discussed according to the topics through which informants revealed their ideas of toys as *matter out of place*, as well as aspects of trust in disembedded activity.

### Disembedding: Abundance and Transience

#### Abundant information

In a charmingly dilapidated area in the city of Łódź in Poland, among graffiti walls and small bakeries lives Kazik, the middle-aged grandfather of one year-old Marek. He and his wife live in a small yet cosy flat, wonderfully furnished with old-fashioned household fittings surrounded by intricately flowery wallpaper. The couple enjoy sinking into their low, bulging couch to watch television series. When alone, Kazik likes to sneak into the living room to watch that occasional documentary on a television surrounded by factual books. One day, he brings home a new puzzle for Marek, and examines it as we sit in the kitchen, soothed by simmer of borscht on the stove. He noticed that “Made in China” label and, tracing his finger along the puzzle frame, he recalls watching something to do with that label:

“I watched a few telecasts on factories in China, because I never been there myself, and there was one program on children who have to work under harsh conditions, some kind of beads made out of toxic, half-finished products ... for Germans. Germans probably don’t buy these anymore more, I don’t really know how that ended but, from what I know, there’s probably a lot of children involved in making these things [toys]”.

Kazik is generally interested in watching documentaries, and it is because of his personal interest in obtaining that kind of information that he *chooses* to watch documentaries. Not all

informants were as interested and consistent in obtaining information through factual documentaries, even though it was there to obtain. In other words, the information was there to be found among the abundance of other information, and it has been ‘lifted out’ from its local context, which was China, thereby *disembedded* (Eriksen 2014: 35). Although information may be widely available in today’s modern ‘information society’ (ibid. 2001: 25), it is impossible to acquire all the information available (ibid. 2001: 28).

The beads Kazik referred to were made from “toxic, half-finished products”, which could have harmed the children involved in the production, and this he attributed to poor regulations:

“If there aren’t any restrictions, no labour codes, like there are here ... then adults probably do the work that requires more precision, or any work that’s more demanding”

However, Kazik expressed trust in the label, and this meant the toy had been “approved” by some form of expertise, “if it’s got that label on it, then it’s alright for children. So we buy it, and it’s been approved for use”. These were not experts he knew *personally*, but he trusted that the quality had been controlled, thereby approved, and it had to be someone’s responsibility, “In Poland, we have control over what comes in ...”, he said.

This was the label that provided confidence in the faith Kazik had for this distant yet reliable expert system. The label served a similar function to what Brembeck refers to as accreditation which is the credibility of sources such as sites that offer product testing (2013: 195). It was trust in the *expertise* that the label represented that Kazik felt he could rely on, and that was enough.

### **A “proper” toy**

A several hour drive from Łódź, amidst woods and meadows, lies a remote village of around thirty families. This was a countryside, where days started with a crowing rooster and ended with a clink of vodka shots. Five year-old Natalia and her brother, eight year-old Konrad, are the youngest members of a relatively large, working-class family. Maria, their aunt, also brought up the topic of child labour in China, but was aware of it only in the context of clothing manufacture:

“... clothes, again, I’m aware that children make them for only a bowl of dry rice – then yes, but not toys maybe since it’s more widely known that children are involved in the production of clothes – but I haven’t thought about toys”.

Like everyone else, she relies on the information available to her, but only that which she acquired among the myriad sources of disembedded information. Child labour *per se* was not right, but considering the price, buying a toy made in China was, according to her, a rational choice:

“ ... there will probably be more of that [child labour], and cheaper – that’s what I think ... [child labour is] definitely not worth it but, looking at our everyday expenses, then it’s probably worth it to save fifty zloty buying a toy made in China than buying a proper one, right?”

A “proper” toy was, to her, not made in China, but it did not matter since toys were generally just toys, and there were other expenses to take into account. In Hulme’s study, an informant enjoyed not having to think when shopping for bargain store items, and this suggested a certain “ease and availability” (2015: 89). For Maria, the toys were cheap, and this carried a certain ease that outweighed the moral concerns of child labour. Besides, she had not heard of child labour in the context of toys made in China, and could merely trust that it was as trivial as it seemed – a simple toy at a low price could not make much of a difference. Purchasing *cheap* toys left plenty of room for all other necessities, and considering the large variety of other things she could divide her income for, this did not oblige her to calculate exactly how much she had spent. An expensive toy was unsuitable, even if it was made in Poland:

“Generally there’s very little of them, and when you find them, the prices are terrifying. They’re incredibly high. Last time me and Eryk saw something ... a bear – the bear was ‘made in Poland’ ... So this poor bear, around this big, cost about 300 to 400 zloty. So yeah, that’s the price difference”.

According to Maria, toys were meant to be cheap the way “Made in China” was almost synonymous with ‘cheap’ for all informants. Although ‘cheap’ often evoked suspicion of low quality, a toy made in China was *expected* to be cheap. Nevertheless, it was not trusted to be labeled a “proper” toy because it had already been labeled “Made in China”. Furthermore, it was not worth buying that proper toy because, according to Maria, the children were more interested in technology:

“... these children are more ‘electronic’ - like if I buy them a car or a doll, they might play for an hour or so and then either it’s broken or left in the corner, forgotten, and the children return to their phones”

According to Maria, the children’s use of toys was transient because there were more interesting things available through technology – games and applications they could sit with for hours. She believed that buying toys for them had less meaning, especially since they could choose among a wide variety of games technology provided them with.

For Ewa, Natalia’s Godmother on the countryside, it was rather the abundance of toys that contributed to the transient use of them. She used to work at a primary school where she witnessed a childhood quite different from her own, and attributed the children’s play to a modern transformation, in which there exists an overabundance and diversity of toys:

“I believe that there are a lot of toys these days. There’s a large variety of toys ... And that children today – because of this abundance and diversity of these toys – aren’t capable of becoming sentimentally attached to a toy. Because if one toy breaks, they can just replace it with another one ... they have a lot of them ... when I go into shops and see shelves of toys, I feel sorry for today’s parents when it comes to choosing toys – because there is so much of them and so many different kinds – that I think it’s difficult for them to choose a proper toy for their child”.

The abundance modernity provides us with allows for lost, broken, old or uninteresting things to be replaced with ease. This is what Hulme refers to as immediacy in terms of consumption which “rests not upon the immediate gratification of the desire for an object which satiates a need or want, but upon the immediate gratification of the desire simply to possess it (regardless of whether or for how long it satiates a need)” (2015: 93). To Ewa, a “proper toy” was one of sentimental value, but becoming sentimentally attached to a toy takes time, and the modern diversity we are presented with does not allow sentimentality to take root. The overabundance of toys contradicted her idea of toys as objects of sentiment, and sentiment to her was a slow process that had no place in accelerated modern life. Hulme also refers to the immediacy of the bargain store as a “rebellion against waiting” (2015: 91). Ewa, growing up on the countryside in a village where she still lives, had a relatively slow-paced life and it took time and planning to travel to town and go shopping. In Ewa’s case, travelling from the countryside into town was experienced as a small-scale “shift in emphasis from productivist

to consumerist” Hulme refers to apropos the societal move against labour (2015: 91). Zygmunt Bauman mentions consumers’ duty to choose in a consumer society “whether or not this results in more consumption” (2005: 30). In the same way, there is a radical change in the array of choices when one shifts from a productivist to a consumerist setting. Locally produced food was common since everyone in the village had their own animals, and among all of Natalia’s and Konrad’s family members in the village, it was generally accepted that local production was generally of higher value. This local setting was something she was used to and she *trusted*. Too many choices felt unnecessary, and the ubiquity of “Made in China” was just that – everywhere and excessive.

### **“Ours is ours”**

Antek was a dab hand at fixing anything around the house. Plumbing, farming and building were all activities he ‘just did’, without much talk about it. He was also Natalia’s and Konrad’s grandfather, and took the role just as seriously but, although discipline was important to him, he often disguised his rough self with a regular input of punch lines. His stout figure and outspoken nature made him a humourous character, and whatever he said needed no explanation – it was simple and ended at that. “Ours is ours, we know it’s good”, he pointed out, shoving toys to the side while placing his cutting board on the table. Antek, growing up during Soviet occupation of Poland, recalls having fewer choices of toys:

“You know what, I dreamt of a bike and I got a hammer instead – to knock that bike out of my head ... Actually, I had a stick with a wheel on it, now it’s all made in China, but everything’s made in China ...”.

Mariusz Czubaj mentions the economic shift in Poland from ‘socialist scarcity’ to ‘capitalist abundance’ which, in contrast to the Swedish morality of moderation in Brembeck’s study (2013: 202), reveals the positive take on overflow in a Catholic country (Czarniewska & Löfgren 2013: 6). As opposed to Ewa, Antek experienced scarcity during Soviet occupation, and held a positive view of abundance. However, there was still a boundary when it came to the origin of abundance – “Ours” meant better, it was something one could *trust*, and the idea of ‘Made in China’ meant an abundance of that which was not *as* good. Polish patriotism was key to the Solidarity movement that revolted against Soviet occupation, uniting the Polish intelligentsia and students with the working class (Wilson 1990: 278-9). Antek, who had been



a working class man during Soviet occupation, had a strong sense of belonging to Poland, and recalls the times of scarcity when local groups worked together to “cheat” the system, “We had those food stamps ... so we had to cheat back then, keep to ‘our people’”, he takes a bite of a sausage, “... I still always give a pig for a friend who helps out or, look, yesterday I got these sausages for lending the tractor”. For Antek, “ours” was certain, and it meant definite trust, an unquestionable kind of trust.

Despite living in the city of Łódź for most her life, Malwina, Marek’s great-grandmother, had witnessed the transformation throughout the years:

“Did you see how many toys he has? That this is all his stuff, oh my ... I remember when I was little, then, whatever rags they used to make a doll, that’s what we played with for weeks! But here, one day and you already need a new toy, another day and now the next toy ...”

Malwina’s childhood was characterised by few toys which were often handmade. Toys were evidently not as accessible as they are in today’s “consumer society” (Bauman 2005: 23), as opposed to the productivist society she grew up in, and in which she had had to work long days in a factory. Malwina sees Marek’s situation in contrast with her own childhood. Not only in terms of the excessive amount of toys he has, but also in terms of transience – to her, Marek’s toys are meant for only a short while, “one day”, and this was the case for that *Chinese* tractor he got:

“... Ania told me this one time, “just one toy, let him have at least one toy from granny”, and so we chose that tractor because it went like ‘ttrrrrrrrah’ and so audibly when we pressed it. So we bought it and he was very pleased! It could go everywhere and he ran after it everywhere – the one on batteries, because the other [Chinese] one quickly fell apart – the mother-in-law bought it [the Chinese one] at a market at the Chinese stand or somewhere with toys. Well, she wanted the very best for him, I just know she later said „Ah, these are Chinese toys”. The tractor didn’t last very long ... it broke so fast that ... I don’t know ... I bought him a tractor once, but that one was probably Polish, since it had batteries or something, and they didn’t die, the tractor didn’t break. I don’t know if they still have it or not but I – to tell you the truth – I don’t buy him toys. If there’s a special occasion, then maybe I’ll give them some money and let them find something, they know what he needs. Otherwise it’s like one person buys this, another buys that and they both get the same thing, well then it’s just a waste ...”

The *other* tractor “quickly fell apart” and, according to her and the mother-in-law, it was Chinese and was expected to break. There also seems to be a notion of certainty that the tractor she bought and did not break was *Polish* – it could be *trusted*, because it did not break. She trusted that the Polish expert system could make toys that were durable as opposed to the Chinese toys. For Malwina, buying more toys for Marek seems unnecessary and could end up with Marek having many of the *same things* which is “just a *waste*” – wastefulness was that unnecessary excess, and it was part of a society she was not used to. She could not trust herself to purchase more in this new, modern society that offered so many choices. Hulme refers to Bauman’s point on ‘the consumerist syndrome’, which “is all about speed, excess and waste” (Bauman 2005 as cited in Hulme 2015: 92). Hulme mentions there being a danger in such assumptions leading to a “moralizing discourse on the perils of consumer society” (ibid.). This type of generalising discourse is very relevant to both Ewa’s and Malwina’s points of view on modern abundance of toys as linked with transient use. However, this was not the case for everyone.

### **Colour is everywhere**

Brembeck reveals that low price does not always mean low value – price and easy accessibility is rather part of the attraction (2013: 202). This attraction was an important prerequisite to the choice of purchase. The display was another key factor to drawing attention to toys – they were colourful, and colourful to most informants, like Jola, Antek’s wife, meant “for children”. Susan Freinkel reveals the power of colour in attracting children’s attention:

“When my older son was born, a well-meaning friend – who had no children of her own – gave him a beautiful cherrywood rattle. It was smooth to the touch, safe to the mouth, made a lovely plinking sound when shaken – and my son wanted nothing to do with it. He wanted the gaily colored set of plastic keys and, later, the squeaky vinyl bath book and, still later, the bright orange car with big blue wheels that made clicking sounds when it was pushed along the floor”.

(2011: 52)

Like Freinkel, most family members were familiar with the effect colour had on the children. Ewa had a new member in her family, a nephew, and claimed that “the more colourful the better” a toy would be for a baby at his stage. Agata, Marek’s mother, also preferred to buy colourful toys:

Agata picks up a red plastic car with many colourful buttons, “this was probably made in China”, she says, “it has a name, ‘Wojtek’”. Wojtek did not seem particularly useful or educational to her, but fulfilled one purpose – that of being colourful, “Well, this one’s just plastic, but it’s colourful, right?”, she says.

Colour is one way toys are unmistakably different from the usual, practical everyday objects, even those that represent some item of the adult world (Nelson & Nilsson 2002: 61). Toys were meant to be colourful – as though the idea of ‘colourful toys’ became central to the disembedded production of toys, which would make sense in a global economy since, as some studies show, colour proves to be profitable (Courtis 2004: 266). Jola remembered one of Natalia’s favourite toys, a pink robot dog, that was bought at a village event, found in “a heap of colourful, Chinese toys” and all of them were cheap. Hulme refers to the “stocky display” of the bargain store because it “suggests a certain ease and availability. Yet ... posits the idea that this availability may not last” (2015: 89). It was a village event afterall, thereby a somewhat special occasion to purchase a toy limited to that event. In this way, like in Hulme’s bargain store, the stocky display of ‘a heap of colourful, Chinese toys’ likewise conveys a sense of urgency (2015: 88). In the same way, the ‘heap’ presented itself as *trustworthy* because it fulfilled its promise of ‘Chinese’, thereby cheap, toys. There was a sense of honesty about it, just like Hulme’s “honesty of the £/\$/€ store” (2015: 89). Toys that had been made in China belonged to the stocky display of the ubiquity of “Made in China”. This is what “Made in China” meant, and this was why some informants were surprised that their children’s expensive toys were “Made in China”, as I write in the next section.

## “Made in China” as *out of place*

### **The brand**

Away from the narrow gangways between closely-spaced ornate stone exteriors and spray-painted façades of the city centre of Łódź, and into a nearby suburban land of modern homes with spacious yards, Paula drives home after work. On the way, she picks up her six year-old son Bruno from preschool. He had just been playing with the toys he shared with his friends. There was a McDonalds paper crown and small Happy Meal toy car behind the steering wheel of Paula’s car, remnants of the recent birthday party Bruno had attended. It was not a favourite toy, nor was it noticeably large, it was just there because it came with a meal. It stayed there,

hidden behind the paper crown as we left the car, bombarded with the relentless barking of dogs of the suburban neighbourhood.

Upon entering their home, three cats and three dogs pranced around in a frenzy of joy. Paula was a philothesian and truly dedicated herself to caring for animals. She had a sensitive soul, and advised to avoid purchasing skins and furs, especially those imported from China. Handing me a stack of leaflets, she pointed to the before-and-after picture of a dog titled “Skinned to make Toys”, and a paragraph warning readers of suspicious labels on Chinese products. “Be a conscious consumer” it said, and this was Paula, because she paid special attention to labels and believed this was a message that needed to reach a wider audience. We sat in the spacious livingroom with vegan apple pie and organic tea, while Bruno played with his toys he had taken out of three large boxes, all of which were eventually emptied towards the end of the interview. Paula notices, contrary to her expectation, that her son’s brand-name toys, licensed under ‘Mattel’, were actually made in China:

“Everywhere – you look at thread, a needle, everything, the whole production is ‘made in China’ ... you know I didn’t even expect that [the ‘Mattel’ toys were made in China] ... however, I could’ve imagined that because of the cheap labour”.

Freinkel writes in her book *Plastic: A Toxic Love Story*, “Welcome to China, where four out of five of the toys in the world are made” (2011: 70). These “Made in China” toys really were ‘everywhere’, and included the toys Paula had bought, which she thought were guaranteed to be of good quality. It was that ‘Mattel’ label that secured her trust in the longevity of a toy:

“ ... Let’s not cheat ourselves ... These are rails from the story of „Thomas and Friends”, and it’s plastic.. here’s the train depot, and this is good plastic... but as you can see, it is ‘Made in China’ but produced under license by Mattel, that company which makes Disney... and under their license these toys are of good plastic and long-lasting – they’re good quality”.

Brembeck refers to accreditation of sources which her informants demonstrated through obtaining trustworthy information in allegedly reliable magazines (2013: 195), some of which may be verified through ‘*peer filtering*’, emphasising the mothers’ social network involved in filtering information on product reliability (ibid. 2013: 199). Paula mentioned having two friends working at Lego, both from whom she received Lego, but she eventually had also bought herself:

“I’ll tell you honestly that if I am to decide, if I am to buy – because it’s different when somebody else gives presents, then I don’t have the choice – then I, generally, buy Lego pieces [rather than “Made in China”]. Then he’s got large sets upstairs”.

Receiving Lego as a gift from friends who work at Lego, together with her confidence for most brand-name toys contributed to a sense of trust – she *trusts* the Lego not to break and, through experience, it proved to confirm and solidify her trust in the brand. The brand marked an expert system that had reached the approval of Paula, as well as her friends, on a personal level.

Not all toys were long-lasting, as Paula demonstrated, breaking off a plastic window of one of Bruno’s cars, “This, for example, you can see it is ‘Made in China’ ... this window .. these toys are for a moment, you know, and some of these are not cheap at all ...”. Despite paying more, possibly expecting durability, experience proved otherwise – it was not durable despite the price, and could no longer be one hundred percent trustworthy. Paula relied on brands so as to delimit all possible purchase outcomes to these *trusted* brands. She was surprised that her expensive toys were actually made in China since, to her, “Made in China” per se did not last long, and her brand-name toys were anything other than “Made in China”. Toys that did not last were “for a moment”, and these were toys to avoid, *out of place* or, in a way, *polluting* Paula’s idea of how toys should be like: long-lasting, and that meant good quality.

## Phases

Toys for a ‘moment’ meant something else for Kasia, Natalia’s and Konrad’s mother. She saw toys as appropriate for a phase linked to either interest or development, which was especially noticeable with Konrad, Natalia’s older, eight-year-old brother:

Kasia: “This all depends on the theme at a certain time – one time he’s interested in military things, then he’s interested in farming so, you know – as you can see, a tractor – it’s broken now ...” .

Konrad: “That was four years ago ...”.

As with Bruno, Konrad had large toy boxes, something Brembeck reveals to be a popular way of managing toys (2013: 204). Bruno still played with most of his toys, but Konrad, being two

years older than Bruno, already accumulated a considerable amount of toys he had lost interest for:

“Konrad doesn’t even keep these in his room ... because he doesn’t play with them anymore. So he doesn’t even keep them in his room – for about half a year now”.

These were boxes that have been stored away, but not necessarily ‘forgotten’ as Ewa suspected them to be and these phases of interest were not as transient, but of varying lengths, even up to two years:

“... some kind of robots ... because I think this was two years ... you know, it was that long ... And it was that you bought two series or something – models – and you put them together to make the third one ...”

As Daniel Miller writes in *The Comfort of Things*, even McDonalds’ Happy Meal toys that one of his informants collected can be of personal value once they become part of a family’s social memory, through which identity is built (2008 : 129). Like Konrad’s robots, such toys could also become collections, and collectionism is a continuous process.

Natalia, being the younger sister, was in the process of gradually approaching Konrad’s ‘stage’, “They also play together. Well, not the blocks, since that’s still a little too hard for her ... she’s still at a different stage. ... but puzzles ... she really likes putting them together”.

Natalia’s toys differed from Konrad’s – when “playing together”, it was rather Konrad’s toys that were being shared, because they were part of a ‘stage’ Natalia was approaching and Konrad was already at. This was also a matter of education, which itself is a continuous process – a ‘moving on’ from one stage of development to the next.

The children’s bedrooms abounded with toys that they often played with at home, despite the large boxes Konrad had put away. This was something Kasia, as a mother, could witness – a sense of development inherent to the continuity of phases. The kind of continuity nobody else could witness because it forms an intrinsic part of a collection of daily life memories which she, as a mother, had access to. This required Kasia to recognise the children’s *moments* of interest, “We always buy ... the kind of toys the child likes at a given moment”. She was not surprised that they were made in China, nor did it matter since there were others who could afford more expensive toys, and her children could access them elsewhere, for example at her friend Adasia’s place, “At Adasia’s place they’ve got completely different toys ... They have

more expensive toys, you know, maybe they've got more money and so they've got different toys". Adasia had the "more expensive" toys but, to Kasia, those were probably not made in China. Acknowledging that "given moment" meant knowing what was appropriate for the child according to his or her interests, and buying anything outside that array of interests meant taking a risk, that the child might not play with the toy, and the danger involved was that of waste. To avoid the danger of waste, Kasia relied on the phases of interest her children exhibited, so as to buy toys the children would play with. As Brembeck points out, toys are difficult to choose as they require even the youngest children's agency to play with them (2013: 207). There is a risk that the child would choose not to play with that toy, which would make the toy unnecessary, and it is the *danger* of purchasing that unnecessary excess Kasia tried to avoid. She could not have complete control over her children's toys, as it depended on what the children wanted to play with. "Made in China" did not matter since toys made in China did not seem to distinguish themselves from any other toys. This made them all the more disembedded in that their local site of origin, which was China, seemed entirely irrelevant.

As phases of interest pass, new phases turn up. Brembeck refers to "peer filtering" in the context of women's social contacts as mothers (2013: 199). However, if the context of toys involves *children's* agency, it may have to extend 'peer filtering' to the children's social contacts. The symbolic meaning that made a certain toy appropriate for Konrad, also had to be verified through *his* peers, and this was why Kasia kept a lookout for any new interests in the social context of play – play was social in that it involved the children just as much as it involved their friends.

Whether or not the toys were made in China was not always irrelevant, particularly not for Konrad's father, Dawid. As Konrad points out, Dawid also bought toys for him, but he was sure that none of them were made in China, "Dad says I have no toys made in China, I don't have bad toys, only good ones".

"Good toys" were, to Dawid, not toys made in China, but not only that - "Made in China" were bad toys and, according to the statement, Konrad did not have toys made in China because he did not have bad toys. Interestingly, almost all of his favourite toys had a "Made in China" label on them but, for the father, the label presented itself as *out of place*. Dawid, the father, was the one who tended to buy the occasional, expensive toy. In his mind, his son did not own "Made in China" toys, but the more expensive ones. Although the label had not been

noticed till then, he did not *trust* the idea of “Made in China” – it was separate from what he believed good quality toys should be like. Dawid was later very surprised to find out that most of Konrad’s toys were indeed made in China.

### **Crossing body boundaries**

“Made in China” toys might look like any other toy, but according to some, like Paula and Maria, there is a “kind of” *Chinese* plastic smell one should be cautious of and avoid. Freinkel reveals the ubiquity of not only plastic, but also the chemicals in certain plastics that the body may absorb “by inhalation, ingestion, or absorption through the skin” and may cause harm (Freinkel 2011: 97). Chemistry, being a specialised field of knowledge, belongs to an *expert system*. Without knowing the details on toxic chemical substances, we rely on our senses, and can only trust that our interpretation is correct. Paula had sensed a chemical *matter out of place* – a suspicious smell arising from certain plastics made in China:

“One time, I was at ‘the Chinese’ – I mean that’s what we say, you have everything Chinese there, so much that you can smell that plastic, those products, that everything there is artificial, that plastic, a kind of caoutchouc, it’s as if you can really smell the rubber ...”.

The Chinese plastic stood out – it crossed the bodily boundary via smell and became recognised as ‘artificial’, thereby foreign to the natural body.

Maria also mentioned considering smell, “ ... first of all, I smell them. Because if it reeks rubber, that kind of Chinese rubber or plastic stench, then I don’t take it”. It was that “Chinese rubber or plastic stench” that she avoided, and that seemed not only suspicious because of its smell, but perceived as foreign, both to her body and mind – it was “Chinese”.

All informants declared they paid attention to the quality of the toys they were buying, especially small parts that might break off. Eugenia, Marek’s aunt, examined a toy she claimed not to be suitable for one-year-old Marek, “... probably not for children because there might be parts ... better not eat them ... and it could be easy to pull apart, a little child might choke on them if it put the toy in its mouth ...”. Small parts, as well as the artificial smells, are perceived to pose a risk of danger. According to Giddens, “trust operates in environments of risk, in which varying levels of security (protection against dangers) can be achieved” (1991: 54). Most toys are labeled with age restrictions, which require people’s



attention as well as trust, but they provide security against danger. The security of the labels was provided by some distant expert system, and the label was a kind of evidence. Maria was the only informant who claimed not to pay enough attention to age restrictions:

“No, I don’t pay attention to that [age restrictions] actually, now even Eryk told me several times that I should pay attention but I really don’t look at that ... maybe if I’m buying a toy for a baby, when the child’s still not so aware, then yes – but if the child’s already over the age of three, then I don’t look at that at all. And that’s my fault”

Maria still felt it was her duty to pay attention to age restriction labels, but herself realised she had not done so. There was trust in the label, and it provided a sense of security for the child. It was the security that protected the child against that *polluting* plastic, or small pieces, that posed a danger by crossing the body boundary. However, it was only when the child was visibly ‘not so aware’ yet or too young that Maria consciously perceived and acted in accordance to the risks of danger, and she felt that it was her “fault”.

## Relevance to Previous Research

Hulme's study (2015) on bargain store items concerned similar themes to those of ubiquity and transience, namely 'immediacy', 'consumerist syndrome' and 'excess' (2015: 90-95). I have taken the broader, yet related, theory of disembedding and investigated how informants sometimes expressed trust in relation to disembedding mechanisms, which often displayed itself as abundance and/or transience. The trust aspect, in relation to Giddens' expert systems, was related to Brembeck's study (2013).

In Brembeck's study, mothers in Sweden mentioned several 'Swedish quality brands' (2013: 196), which also conveyed a sense of familiarity and *trust*. Furthermore, Brembeck mentions accreditation and verification – accreditation concerning the credibility of sources of information, and verification being the aforementioned *peer filtering* (2013: 195).

Accreditation referred to magazines or other sources from which mothers could obtain information on product safety (ibid.). Concerning toys made in China, the age restrictions or any safety labels served a similar function by displaying a rule – the presence of the label meant that the rule should be abided by. The decision-making presented in Brembeck's chapter notably relies on *trust* in disembedding mechanisms – Linda, for instance, chooses 'trendy' and 'ecologically sound' toys (2013: 200-1), both of which contain symbolic markers of *expert systems* (Giddens 1991: 54). Linda chose these toys according to the symbolic information they were imbued with, and this was expressed with the appropriate, *social* labels – 'trendy' and 'ecologically sound'. Information also flowed in via internet sources or television, such as the documentary Kazik recalled. Trust of these sources could either be solidified or reduced through peer filtering. According to Paula, even the label on a "Made in China" toy could not be trusted since there were false labels, and unlike other informants she paid special attention to such detail. However, not all these sources of information were clearly recalled, as if part of a mass of accredited information not yet thoroughly verified, and thus dependent on *trust* of some distant expert system.

## Conclusion

This thesis has investigated attitudes and beliefs surrounding the “Made in China” label in relation to children’s toys. The subject of children’s toys in a globalised world also allowed for analysis of attitudes towards “Made in China” in terms of the abundance and transience of toys made in China experienced by participants in this study. These themes conveyed the experience of disembedding activity exemplified by the use of “Made in China” toys. Toys were thought of as abundant, and sometimes transient. The “Made in China” label on toys was not always taken for granted – sometimes toys were not expected to have been made in China, and this could either be experienced as acceptable or unacceptable. As unacceptable, or *out of place*, the toys carried a negative reputation concerning “Made in China” quality in form of a stigma. Although the stigma may diminish over time, and has already started to do so in areas of technology, fashion and manufacture in general (Saleh, A. 2016), toys were often not given as much attention as technologies, automobiles and other products which were rather associated with the adult world participants belonged to. Other times, toys were still accepted despite presumed low quality, or for other reasons. However, the “Made in China” label still carries a surplus meaning which may create a stigma. This study has looked into how these views may be expressed in terms of “Made in China” toys. On the one hand, disapproval of “Made in China” presented the toys as *matter out of place*, while on the other hand there was *trust* in disembedded activity, and presented itself in various ways, varying from person to person.

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# Appendix 1

## Interview : guiding questions

The following interview plan is meant to be flexible since the interviews are semi-structured and so many of the questions should be *guided into* to the narratives (maybe in the form of shorter words so as not to interfere with the flow of the narratives). I am most likely not going to ask all of these questions and I presume they will reveal themselves.

The interviews usually involved several toys or series of toys as well as general opinions about quality, China, or ‘today’s toys’, depending on what the informant found significant.

- **Where was it made? [most likely a toy made in China]**
  - What do you usually consider when buying toys?
    - Was the purchase spontaneous (as in impulsive?) If not, did it take time/planning?
    - How was or is this toy useful? / In what way is it convenient?
  - How would you describe its quality?
    - What feelings does this object evoke?
    - Is this an object you could easily dispose of? How?
  - What do you think of this object being made in China?
    - What do you feel is different between objects like these (coming from China) and locally produced things (made in Poland)? Does it matter?
    - Previous experiences of products from China?
    - How would you imagine this thing being made or the people making it?
    - How about (mention another *type* of product from China i.e. toothpaste/food), would you use (eat/drink/apply/wear) this? (if not, why?)
  - Have you heard of the Silk Road Economic Belt? (if not, I explain) What do you think of it (the New Silk Road and intensified trade with China)?