The real toy story (key stages 3 and 4)

What the photo says
China produces 75% of the world’s toys. This image could be used as an introduction to a topic on consumption or manufacturing, starting with an enquiry into where our consumer products are made. The photo is part of a 2004 installation called The Real Toy Story, by Michael Wolf, which can be seen at his website: http://www.photomichaelwolf.com/the_real_toy_story

The more general context is questions like these – all fertile areas of study for geographers:

- Where are our consumer products from?
- Why are they produced there?
- How are they produced and in what conditions?

Lesson ideas
Context: Manufacturing, industry and consumption

Lesson 1

Resources
- before the lesson, ask students to note the origin of ten consumer products from home
- Google Maps (http://maps.google.co.uk/) could be used to map the origin of the products; alternatively, atlases and world maps will be needed
- access to an online measuring tool such as ‘How far is it?’ (http://www.freemaptools.com/how-far-is-it-between.htm).

Suggested activities
Show students the image. Ask them what the workers are producing; is there a discrepancy between this and their perceptions about the location of the factory? Why might the company manufacture their products in this location?

As an individual or group activity, students map the origin of their consumer products, using Google Maps or atlases and world maps. Ask students to describe the distribution of the origins of the goods and consider why they are made there. Using Google Maps, the atlas scale, or an online measuring tool, students could work out the average distance travelled by their consumer products.

A follow-up activity would be to discuss the reasons why consumer products are made in certain locations and the conditions experienced by workers.
Lesson 2

Resources

- access to ICT facilities for producing job advertisements and researching allegations about working conditions
- source information about the conditions faced by workers in Chinese toy factories. A Google search will turn up plenty of sources, such as these:

Suggested activities

Show students the image. Ask them what skills would be needed to produce the toys shown in the image. Ask them to research the working conditions in Chinese toy factories, using the internet if available; otherwise provide them with a selection of source articles.

What did they discover about the workers' conditions? Did this shock them? Do they think there is a certain irony in the contrast between the way manufacturers and retailers promote the toys and the conditions in which they are produced?

Ask students to produce a mock job advertisement/description for an NGO working to improve the conditions of toy workers in China. Students should explain the skills needed, but also the reality of the working conditions.

A follow-up activity could involve discussing how consumers could influence the manufacturers' policies on working conditions in the factories to which they sub-contract their work. Also, the effectiveness of unionisation of the work force could also be discussed.

Curriculum opportunities

Global dimension: The example of these ubiquitous toys may begin to help us understand the interconnectedness of the world.

Citizenship: An opportunity to discuss how consumers and NGOs may influence manufacturers’ policies on working conditions in subcontracted factories; whether collective action by workers, through unions, is a way of improving working conditions; and the integrity of media sources.

Tony Cassidy, GA Secondary Geography Quality Mark Working Party and past member of GA Secondary Phase Committee