Sociology and Social Justice

Edited by Margaret Abraham
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Introduction

At approximately 8 am on 17 March 2010, Tian Yu, a 17-year-old worker, went to the window of her fourth-floor dorm room at the Foxconn factory and jumped. She survived, and lives paralyzed from the waist down. Many more have followed Yu’s attempt, and have tried to end their lives, even as fans of Apple consume new generations of electronic products as if there were no tomorrow. In 2010, 18 young rural migrant workers attempted to commit suicide at Foxconn facilities in Shenzhen and other Chinese cities, resulting in 14 deaths; four survived with crippling injuries. The workers who attempted or committed suicide ranged in age between 17 and 25 – in the prime of youth (Pun and Chan, 2012; Chan, 2013). What drove them to take such desperate acts? Is suicide an extreme form of labor protest chosen by some to expose an intolerable and oppressive production regime, in which rural migrant workers are deprived of dignified work and life?

The internationalization of electronics production poses challenges to workers and their supporters from Greater China (including mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan) and around the world. We contend that the responsibility for the spate of individual worker suicides is not Foxconn’s alone, although as the manufacturer of more than 50% of the world’s electronic products (Dinges, 2010), it is an enormous player and bears direct responsibility. The labor crises are by no means limited to the Foxconn workers. They extend far beyond the factory floor, to the profit squeeze that Foxconn and other supplier factories face from such multinational corporate giants as Apple, Microsoft, IBM, Google, Samsung, HP, and Dell (Chan et al., 2015, 2016). As activist academics, based in Hong Kong and the United States, in the face of the Foxconn suicide tragedy and the waves
of labor protests over the past seven years, we ask two major questions: How to strengthen workers’ power through organizing a global anti-sweatshop campaign? How to connect grassroots labor struggles that spring from the point of production, to student and consumer campaigns that can impact international consciousness and the sphere of consumption?

Scholars and activists envisage a future in which ‘each new generation of technical improvements in electronic products should include parallel and proportional improvements in environment, health and safety, and social justice attributes’ (Smith et al., 2006, p. 11). With a shift in the location of world manufacturers from Europe and North America to China, and other low-income industrializing countries since the 1970s, China has risen to become the world’s factory. During the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, foreign firms accounted for ‘nearly 60 percent of all exports and 90 percent of exports designated “high tech” by the Chinese government’ (Kroeber, 2008, p. 33). Of the foreign-invested electronics manufacturers, Foxconn was, and remains, the leader of high tech exports.

The Rise of Foxconn as the World’s Largest Electronics Manufacturer

In the course of China’s reform and opening, large foreign-invested enterprises have secured favorable terms from local governments. With access to industrial land and human resources, Foxconn has fine-tuned and assembled personal computers, mobile phones, video-game consoles, and other consumer electronics products for global brands, soon outstripping Western and other Asian manufacturers in providing low-cost, efficient services. By the end of the 1990s, Apple, Lucent Technologies, Nortel, Alcatel, Ericsson, and many other technology manufacturers had ‘sold off most, if not all, of their in-house manufacturing capacity – both at home and abroad – to a cadre of large and highly capable US-based contract manufacturers’, and international manufacturers led by Foxconn (Sturgeon et al., 2011, p. 236).

Like many other foreign-funded enterprises in South China, in 1988, Foxconn began with a small workforce of 150 Chinese rural migrants, approximately 100 of them young women. Unmarried female middle-school graduates were particularly prized by managers, who saw them as having such desirable feminine attributes as dexterity and docility; making them ideally suited to assembly work. According to one estimate, in the 1980s approximately 70% of the factory labor force in the Shenzhen
Special Economic Zone in Guangdong province was female, typical of the
gendered division of labor at export-oriented industries (Andors, 1988).

Foxconn’s expansion, built on strong foundations of manufacturing
and assembly for export, can be aptly summarized in a corporate slogan:
‘China rooted, global footprint’ (Foxconn Technology Group, 2013,
p. 4). The Taiwanese-owned company currently has production facili-
ties in 29 countries on five continents, including: Taiwan, China, Japan,
South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore,
Vietnam, India, United Arab Emirates, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, the
Netherlands, Austria, Germany, Russia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia,
Hungary, Turkey, Ireland, Scotland, Brazil, Mexico, Canada, and the
United States. The heart of its industrial empire, however, is in China.
Taiwanese scholar Tse-Kang Leng estimated that by the early 2000s
‘90 percent of Hon Hai’s net profit’ had been generated from ‘its business
in China’ (2005, p. 70). Hon Hai Precision Industry Company, founded in
1974, is the Taipei-based parent company of Foxconn.

Between 2003 and 2004, Foxconn acquired handset assembly plants
owned by Motorola, in Mexico, and by Nokia, in Finland, and merged
with Ambit Microsystems Corporation in Taiwan, enabling it to branch
out from computer to mobile communications equipment manufacturing
(Hon Hai Precision Industry Company, 2017). CommonWealth Magazine
reported that Terry Gou, founder and chief executive officer of Hon Hai
and Foxconn, ‘presided over successive lightning quick acquisitions across
Scandinavia, South America and Asia, becoming Taiwan’s first business
chief to complete mergers on three different continents within a single
to the ranks of the best CEOs around the globe: ranked 40th out of 100.

Today, the large contract manufacturers for Apple include Foxconn,
Pegatron, Quanta Computer, Flextronics, BYD, Compal Electronics,
Inventec Appliances, and Wistron, among others. Jeff Williams, Apple’s
senior vice president of operations, confirmed that in 2014 ‘more than
1,400 talented engineers and managers were stationed in China’,
to manage engineering and manufacturing operations at large production
sites; they worked and lived ‘in the factories constantly’ (BBC, 2014).
According to information provided by an Apple University researcher,
in 2016, in China alone, Apple has ‘more than 2,000 large and small sup-
pliers, including first-tier and sub-tier suppliers of parts and components,
materials and equipment’. This data suggests that China has become the
center of globalized electronics production.
Behind the ‘Made in China’ label is a vast network of global brands and their suppliers. When the calculation of the value of the products is credited entirely to China, however, the picture is distorted. The largest share of profits is retained by American, European, Japanese, and South Korean corporations that designed and manufactured the most technologically advanced parts. In 2010, Apple’s corporate strength was well illustrated by its ability to capture an extraordinary 58.5% of the sales price of the iPhone, an unparalleled achievement in world manufacturing (see Figure 8.1). Particularly notable is that labor costs in China accounted for the smallest share, only 1.8%, or nearly US$10, of the US$549 retail price of the iPhone 4 at that time. Other major component providers captured slightly over 14% of the value of the iPhone. The cost of raw materials was just over one-fifth of the total value (21.9%). Above all, it is industrial design, global marketing, and business acumen that reap the richest rewards for Apple, with a large share of the profit is generated by Japanese, South Korean, European, and American suppliers of sophisticated components for the iPhone. In this international division of labor there is relatively little value created by the workers in electronics processing and assembly.

**Figure 8.1** Distribution of value for the iPhone 4, 2010

*Note:* The percentage is calculated on the iPhone 4’s retail price at US$549 in 2010. No amount for ‘distribution and retail’ is shown because Apple is paid directly by a cellular company, such as AT&T or Verizon, which handles the final stage of the sale.

*Source:* Adapted from Kraemer et al. (2011, p. 5).
Suicide or Murder?

Sean Starrs highlights the fact that now more than ever, ‘it is more important to investigate who ultimately profits from the production and sale of goods and services rather than where their production or sale is geographically located’ (2015, p. 19). Global brands, like Apple and Foxconn, should be held as accountable as any foreign government for conditions in the factories that produce their products and their profits.

Labor and the Apple–Foxconn Production Chain

The centralization and concentration of giant industrial capital, with Chinese workers providing the core labor force, has directly contributed to Apple’s, and other tech multinationals’, global success (Chan et al., 2013). Foxconn has the ability to transform Apple designs into efficiently manufactured and assembled products, working with Japanese, South Korean, and other manufacturers of sophisticated components, with the final product honed and assembled by Chinese workers and shipped to the world. It has also perfected another important skill. Because of the large-scale of production and the hundreds of thousands of jobs at its largest plants, Foxconn has been able to negotiate effectively with local governments to obtain lucrative terms that maximize both its own and Apple’s profits (Barboza, 2016).

Apple contracted Foxconn to build most of its products in southeastern China, beginning in 2002, with facilities later expanding throughout the country. More than a dozen business groups compete within Foxconn, working on speed, quality, efficiency, engineering services, and added value to maximize profits. Two ‘Apple business groups’ – iDPBG (integrated Digital Product Business Group) and iDSBG (innovation Digital System Business Group) – have risen to become the ‘superstars’ at Foxconn. With more than one million workers in 30-plus production sites in China alone, while producing iPhones and a wide array of best-selling electronic products, Foxconn simultaneously produces a working class, and its policies provoke labor struggles.

In the wake of the Foxconn suicide wave in 2010, Apple tightened the noose on Foxconn by splitting iPhone orders with Pegatron to minimize reputational risks, and also to maximize profits. Faced with Apple’s pressures for products to meet demand, Foxconn was compelled to further increase overtime work, resulting in 60–70-hour work weeks during the busy time (far beyond the normal 40-hour work week stipulated under the national Chinese labor law). An ever-shorter production cycle, accelerated
finishing time, and heavy overtime requirements placed intense pressures on assembly-line workers even when many of them were desperate for overtime wages.

**Surviving Foxconn and Apple**

The iPhone is the signature Apple product. Apple sold one million units of the digital music player iPod in two years, but it took just 74 days to reach that milestone with the introduction of the original iPhone in 2007, and a sprint of just three days to surpass sales of 1.7 million of the updated iPhone 4 in June 2010 (Apple, 2010). During the same period, Foxconn workers toiled day and night to ramp up iPhone production. Foxconn – until the 2010 suicide cluster – was the sole manufacturer of iPhones (Chan and Pun, 2010).

In the hospital, in July 2010, suicide survivor Tian Yu talked about her family background, the circumstances that led to her employment at Foxconn, and her experiences working on the assembly line and living in the factory dormitory. During interviews with Yu and her family, it became

![Figure 8.2 and 8.3](image)

Tian Yu in the Shenzhen Longhua People’s Hospital in Guangdong province. Half-paralyzed, she is confined to bed or a wheelchair.
Suicide or Murder?

clear that her story had much in common with that of many Foxconn employees, who comprise the new generation of Chinese workers.³

Yu belongs to the generation of ‘left-behind children’, as the out-migration wave enveloped China’s countryside. ‘I was born into a farming family in February 1993 in a village’, Yu relates. What was recently a village is now part of Laohekou (Old River Mouth) city in Hubei province, which has a population of 530,000.

Yu’s grandmother brought her up while her parents were far from home supporting the family as migrant factory workers. Like many of the children who were left behind, she spent her early years playing with other neighborhood children. There was little parental guidance. Eventually, her parents returned home to resume farming with just enough money to renovate the house. Yu, the eldest child, has a sister and a brother. She hoped, in the future, to be able to help look after her 12-year-old brother who was born deaf. ‘At best my family could earn about 15,000 yuan on the land in a year, hardly enough to sustain six people. Growing corn and wheat on tiny parcels of land and keeping a few pigs and chickens might not leave us hungry,’ Yu said, ‘but making a better life is challenging if one seeks to eke out a living on the small family plot.’

China’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 brought about new challenges to villagers, who faced a flood of cheap subsidized crops being imported from overseas. Despite gains associated with the elimination of agricultural taxes in 2005, and the subsequent establishment of a social insurance scheme under the new socialist countryside campaign, with the departure of most young people for the cities, the prospects for household-based agriculture and rural development generally have remained dim. Sporadic efforts toward cooperative rural construction and alternative development initiatives aside, opportunities for sustainable farming and lucrative non-farm work opportunities in the remote villages are scarce.

After graduating from junior secondary school and completing a short course at the local vocational school, Yu decided to leave home to find a job. For her cohort of rural youth, the future, the only hope, lay in the cities. By 2010, TV and especially Internet technology and mobile communications had opened a window onto the real and imagined city lifestyle. ‘Almost all the young people of my age had gone off to work, and I was excited to see the world outside, too’, Yu explained.

Soon after the Spring Festival, the Chinese New Year, in early February 2010, Yu’s father gave her 500 yuan to tide her over while searching for
work in the coastal Guangdong province, the heart of the burgeoning electronics industry. He also provided a second-hand cell phone so that she could call home. He asked her to stay safe.

*From Farm to Factory*

‘My cousin brought me to the long-distance bus station’, Yu recalls her departure for the city. ‘For the first time in my life I was far away from home. Getting off the bus, my first impression of the industrial town was that Shenzhen was nothing like what I had seen on TV.’

On 8 February, at the recruitment center, Yu recalls: ‘I queued up for the whole morning, filled out the job application form, pressed my finger-tips onto the electronic reader, scanned my identity card, and took a blood test to complete the health check procedures. Foxconn assigned me staff number F9347140.’ Yu also received a color-printed Foxconn Employee Handbook, which is replete with upbeat language for new workers: ‘Hurry toward your finest dreams, pursue a magnificent life. At Foxconn, you can expand your knowledge and accumulate experience. Your dreams extend from here until tomorrow.’

At employee orientation, a human resources manager told a group of new recruits including Yu, ‘Your potential is only limited by your aspirations! There’s no choosing your birth, but here you will reach your destiny. Here you need only dream, and you will soar!’ He told stories of entrepreneurs like Apple chief Steve Jobs (1955–2011), Intel Chairman and CEO Andrew Grove (1936–2016), and Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates (1955–), to inspire new workers.

Yu remembers, ‘Then, I and hundreds of other new workers were taken from Foxconn’s recruitment center to the factory, about an hour’s ride on the company bus. The setting sun bathed the Foxconn facilities in golden light.’

Foxconn is a key node in the global production network, where production, assembly, and shipment of finished products to world consumers continues around the clock 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Yu joined the ranks of 400,000 Foxconn Longhua workers. The ‘campus’, as the managers like to call it, organizes production and daily reproduction activities in a densely populated environment. The gigantic Longhua complex includes multi-storey factories, dormitories, warehouses, two hospitals, two libraries, a book store, a kindergarten, an educational institute (known as the Foxconn University), a post office, a fire brigade with two fire engines,
an exclusive television network, banks, soccer fields, basketball courts, tennis courts, track and field, swimming pools, cyber theaters, shops, supermarkets, cafeterias, restaurants, guest houses, and even a wedding dress shop. Container trucks and forklifts rumble nonstop, serving a grid of factories that churn out iPhones, iPads, and other electronics products for Apple, and many global electronics giants.

‘I arrived late for my first day of work. The factory was so big, and I got lost. I spent a long time looking for the workshop’, Yu recalls. The factory directory shows that there are ten zones, listed from A to H, J, and L, and they are further subdivided into A1, A2, A3, J20, L6, L7, and so on. It takes almost an hour to walk from the south main gate to the north main gate, and another hour to walk from the east to the west gate. Yu did not know what each building was, nor did she know the meaning of the English acronyms that could be seen written everywhere.

Sisters or Strangers?

‘Hand in hand, heart to heart, Foxconn and I grow together’, reads a bright red Foxconn banner above the production line. It suggests that workers and the company share a common destiny. In contrast to the corporate image of ‘a warm family with a loving heart’, however, Foxconn workers frequently experience isolation and loneliness, some of it deliberately created by managerial staff to prevent the formation of strong social bonds among workers.

Managers and foremen prohibit conversation during working hours in the workshop. ‘I woke up at 6:30 am, attended a morning meeting at 7:20 am, started work at 7:40 am, went to lunch at 11 am, and then usually skipped the evening meal to work overtime until 7:40 pm’, Yu adds. ‘Friendly chit-chat among co-workers is not very common even during the break. Everyone rushes to queue up for lunch and eat quickly.’ A long work day of enforced silence, punctuated only by the noise of the machines, is the norm.

On top of the ‘standard’ 12-hour shifts during busy periods, like all other workers, Yu attended compulsory unpaid work meetings every day. ‘I reported to the line leaders 15 to 20 minutes earlier for roll call. Leaders exhorted us to maintain high productivity, reach daily output targets, and keep discipline.’ The assembly lines ran on a 24-hour non-stop basis. The well-lit factory floor was visible throughout the night from afar. Yu felt that there was no way to say no to overtime.
Working on one of the Apple product lines, Yu was responsible for spot inspections of glass screens to see whether they were scratched. During the month or more that Yu worked on the production line, she made no friends. Foxconn’s practice of rotating day and night shifts on a monthly basis not only effects workers’ rest, but it also hinders their ability to make friends and establish networks of social support. Yu said, ‘I was switched to the night shift in March. Checking the screens of the products made my eyes feel intense pain.’

The factory dormitory incorporates a massive migrant labor force without the support of family networks. Whether single or married, the worker is assigned a bunk space (upper or lower bunk) for one person. The ‘private space’ consists simply of one’s own bed behind a self-made curtain with little common living space. With roommates assigned to different departments and often working different shifts, it was difficult to socialize. When speaking of her roommates, Yu said, ‘We were not close’.

Foxconn houses most of its employees in multi-storey dormitories, at or close to the factory. The workplace and living space are compressed to facilitate high-speed round-the-clock production. Although eight girls were housed in the same room, Yu said, ‘We were strangers to each other. Some of us had just moved in as others moved out. None of the roommates was from Hubei.’ Yu’s father explained the significance of this: ‘When she first came to Shenzhen, sometimes when others spoke, she couldn’t understand much.’

Random dormitory allocations break up friendships and localistic networks. ‘At Foxconn, when I felt lonely, I would sometimes chat on QQ® online’, Yu remarks. But those chatting on the QQ online community often remain far apart in time, space, and experience.

**The Accumulation of Despair**

New workers, like Yu, are often reprimanded for working ‘too slowly’ on the line, regardless of their efforts to keep up with the ‘standard work pace’. Emphasizing the company’s claim to produce the world’s best products for global customers, the maximum allowable rate of defective products is set low. Yu said, several times, that she had made no mistakes on the screens, but the line leader blamed her anyway. With only a single day off every second week, or two rest days during the whole month, there
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was no spare time for Yu to use the Olympic-sized swimming pool in ‘the factory city’.

Yu recalls, ‘After I had worked a month, when it was time to distribute wages, everyone else got their wage debit cards, but I did not’. Yu was deeply troubled. She asked the line leader what had happened. Although she worked at Longhua, she was told that there was no record of her personal information at Longhua.

At Foxconn, the cash flow required for workers’ wages is huge, and payment is done by a banking system through wage debit cards rather than giving out cash to individual workers. A debit card is a bank card, with which a worker can deposit, withdraw, and transfer money from 24-hour ATM machines that are accessible from within the Longhua complex. But where was her debit card?

Yu had been interviewed at the recruitment center in Foxconn Guanlan before being sent to the Longhua facility. Unbeknownst to Yu, the Human Resources Department at Guanlan had kept her personnel file and failed to transfer the documents to Longhua, where she actually worked. The result was that her debit card system at Foxconn Longhua had never been set up. ‘I had no choice but to take a bus to Foxconn Guanlan on my own.’ Yu recounted her experience that day. The Guanlan factory, which began production in 2007, employed 130,000 workers in early 2010. Entering an unfamiliar factory compound, ‘I went to Block C10, B1, B2, and from floor to floor of building after building to inquire about my wage card’. After a fruitless day of searching for the right office, with managers and administrators deflecting responsibility, Yu was unable to find information about her wage card. ‘I went from office to office by myself but no one would point me in the right direction. They all brushed me off, telling me to ask someone else.’

Yu had not been paid for a month of work, approximately 1,400 yuan consisting of basic pay of 900 yuan plus overtime premiums. By then it was the middle of March, and after more than one month in Shenzhen, she had spent all of the money her parents had given her. ‘Where could I borrow money? At this moment of crisis my cell phone broke, and I was unable to get in touch with my cousin in Shenzhen.’

Yu had reached the breaking point. The exhausting assembly line, harsh factory discipline and friendless dormitory, together with the difficulty she faced contacting her family, were compounded by the exhaustion of her funds and the company’s failure to pay her. Her
testimony reveals how overwhelmed she felt. ‘I was so desperate that my mind went blank.’

In the early morning on 17 March, Yu jumped from her dormitory building in despair. After 12 days in a coma, she awoke to find that she had become paralyzed from the waist down. Yu is now confined to bed or a wheelchair for the rest of her life.

One Life to Live

In October 2010, facing mounting public anger over the multiple worker suicides and the company’s callous handling of the cases, Foxconn disbursed a one-off ‘humanitarian payment of 180,000 yuan to help the Tian family to go home’. This gesture was made in a bid to end its corporate responsibility, and to remove the problem from the eyes of the Chinese and the international press.

Foxconn sent Yu’s parents home in exchange for their silence about management’s negligence. In the words of Yu’s father, ‘It was as if they were buying and selling a thing’.

When Yu left the hospital, however, she also left us, as researchers, with some troubling questions about the lives of one million Foxconn workers, and the responsibilities of corporations and the Chinese government to protect workers.

Suicide as Protest

Suicide involves an intensely personal, and social, struggle on the part of the individual. In November 1970, in South Korea, 22-year-old textile worker Chun Tae-il poured gasoline on himself and set himself afire as a means of rallying fellow workers and calling on the dictatorial government of Park Chung-hee to protect worker rights. His suicide inspired the labor and democratic movements that followed, and helped transform the South Korean dictatorship, galvanizing ‘collective action by mobilizing the “hearts and minds” of the target audience’ (Kim, 2008, p. 549). Did Chinese workers at Foxconn, not unlike their Korean counterparts, take their lives to mobilize for social justice?

Behind the façade of prosperity, exemplified by the Shenzhen skyline, Foxconn worker Xu Lizhi (1990–2014) ended his life on 30 September 2014. He was 24 years old. A native of rural Guangdong, his multiple attempts to find employment that would allow him to escape from the
assembly line, such as a position as a librarian in the factory, had failed. He left this, his last poem, next to his deathbed.

*On My Deathbed*

I want to take another look at the ocean,
Behold the vastness of tears from half a lifetime
I want to climb another mountain,
Try to call back the soul that I’ve lost
I want to touch the sky,
Feel that blueness so light
But unable to do any of these, I’m leaving this world.
Everyone who’s heard of me
Shouldn’t be surprised at my leaving
Even less should you sigh or grieve
I was fine when I came, and fine when I left.

— Xu Lizhi, 30 September 2014

While Lizhi worked and lived, he was never able to find a comfortable niche in the Foxconn world of labor, or to escape it to find a better life. Another of his poems reflects this.

*Rented Room*

A space of ten square meters
Cramped and damp, no sunlight all year
Here I eat, sleep, shit, and think
Cough, get headaches, grow old, get sick but still fail to die
Under the dull yellow light again I stare blankly, chuckling like an idiot
I pace back and forth, singing softly, reading, writing poems
Every time I open the window or the wicker gate
I seem like a dead man
Slowly pushing open the lid of a coffin

— Xu Lizhi, 2 December 2013
Some of his most poignant poetry conveys a sense of life on the assembly line. In this next poem he is capturing the exhaustion of workers on the line, falling asleep while standing.

_Falling Asleep While Standing_

The paper before my eyes fades to yellow
With a steel pen I chisel on it uneven black
Full of working words
Workshop, assembly line, machine, work card, overtime, wages …
They’ve trained me to become docile
Don’t know how to shout or rebel
Don’t know who to complain to or denounce
Only how to silently endure exhaustion
When I first set foot in this place
I hoped only for that grey pay slip on the tenth of each month
To grant me some belated solace
For this I had to grind away my rough edges, grind away my words
Refuse to skip work
Refuse to take sick leave
Refuse leave for private reasons
Refuse to be late
Refuse to leave early.
By the assembly line I stood straight as iron, with versatile hands
On many days, many nights
I fell asleep while standing

– Xu Lizhi, 20 August 2011

Later Lizhi wrote of a screw that fell to the ground, in perhaps his most desolate reflection on life and death at Foxconn.

_A Screw Fell to the Ground_

A screw fell to the ground
In this dark night of overtime
Plunging vertically, lightly clinking
It won’t attract anyone’s attention
Just like last time
On a night like this
When someone plunged to the ground

– Xu Lizhi, 9 January 2014

As Lizhi here recorded, respect for human life could never be earned on the line.

When *Time* magazine nominated ‘workers in China’ as runner-up in the 2009 Person of the Year, the editor commented that they have brightened the future of humanity by ‘leading the world to economic recovery’ (Ramzy, 2009). But what of those who sacrificed to help usher in economic recovery?

In their defiant deaths the Foxconn workers call on the Chinese nation – and international society – to wake up before more lives are sacrificed. Throwing their tender, still not full-grown bodies from dormitory buildings is an act of frustration and defiance. Neither in China nor internationally, however, should anyone have to make sacrifices of this kind. In our view, each suicide was tantamount to murder.

**Apple’s Outsourcing and its Global Supplier Responsibility Program**

How have image-conscious companies such as Apple responded to Foxconn worker suicides, and subsequent worker strikes and protests? In February 2011, Apple released its Supplier Responsibility Progress Report to show the remedial measures taken by Foxconn in the aftermath of suicides. Apple’s auditing team was quick to applaud Foxconn’s emergency responses:

The team commended Foxconn for taking quick action on several fronts simultaneously, including hiring a large number of psychological counselors, establishing a 24-hour care center, and even attaching large nets to the factory buildings to prevent impulsive suicides. (Apple, 2011, p. 19)

What is striking about these ‘remedial measures’ is that all were put in place only after the negative publicity that followed the suicide cluster.
Moreover, none of them address such core issues as speedup, and illegal levels of compulsory overtime work in Foxconn factories. Nowhere does it mention Apple’s own direct responsibility in demanding immediate delivery of new models.

In transnational production, Apple’s competitiveness is predicated on its ability to design and market innovative products to meet ever-changing consumer demand. Tracking demand worldwide, it adjusts production forecasts daily. As Apple CEO, Tim Cook, who succeeded the late Steve Jobs in August 2011, puts it, ‘Nobody wants to buy sour milk’ (Satariano and Burrows, 2011). Streamlining and controlling the global supply chain on the principle of ‘competition against time’ is Apple supply-chain management’s goal. As a result, compressed delivery time of new products has repeatedly taken precedence over worker health and safety and rights protection, at times with tragic consequences. Under such circumstances, whatever the stepped-up audits, the tremendous pressure by Apple on suppliers to cut corners continues.

In this self-policing – or more accurately public relations – mode of corporate social responsibility, Apple failed to address the issues that arose from its own ordering practices, which contributed directly to blatant rights violations by supplier factories (Drahokoupil et al., 2016). Moreover, Apple is not alone. Apple and other leading corporate members moved to resolve the public relations crisis in a quick fix, while ignoring the problematic production conditions that gave rise to the contentious labor relations in their supply chains.

**Holding Apple and Foxconn Accountable for Workers’ Rights**

On 18 May 2010, nine mainland Chinese and Hong Kong academics issued an open letter calling on Foxconn and the Chinese government to do justice to the young generation of migrant workers. The statement reads:

From the moment they [the new generation of rural migrant workers] step beyond the doors of their houses, they never think of going back to farming like their parents. … The moment they see there is little possibility of building a home in the city through hard work, the very meaning of their work collapses. The path ahead is blocked, and the road to retreat is closed. Trapped in this situation, the workers face a serious identity crisis and this
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magnifies psychological and emotional problems. Digging into this deeper level of societal and structural conditions, we come closer to understanding the ‘no way back’ mentality of these Foxconn employees. (Chan and Pun, 2010)

In late May 2010, our Hong Kong-based research partner, Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior (SACOM), created a blog dedicated to the Foxconn worker victims and their families, with the theme song ‘Grief’ spreading quickly throughout the web. Across the Straits, in June, more than 300 Taiwanese issued another open statement and held a press conference to condemn Hon Hai/Foxconn management and its brutality toward mainland workers. On the basis of these two open statements, linking scholars and students from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, a large-scale collective investigation of Foxconn began in the summer of 2010.

SACOM, the non-governmental organization formed by Hong Kong university students and scholars in 2005, has striven to advance labor rights in mainland China and the world. On 8 June 2010, the date of Foxconn’s annual shareholder meeting in Hong Kong, SACOM launched the ‘Global Day of Remembrance for Victims of Foxconn’. Foxconn workers in Guadalajara, Mexico, on 8 June 2010, demonstrated in solidarity to protest against oppression in China, setting up a makeshift cemetery to let the workers rest in peace and draw media attention at home and abroad (CEREAL, 2010). It was a moment when the hearts and minds of worker supporters were mobilized.

On 14 June 2010, United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), working through a nationwide network of over 150 American college and high school chapters, sent an open letter urging the then Apple CEO, Steve Jobs, to ‘address the problems in Shenzhen by ensuring payment of living wages, legal working hours, and democratic union elections in Foxconn supplier factories’ (USAS, 2010). The letter was copied to our research partners and campaign allies, including SACOM, San Francisco Chinese Progressive Alliance, and Washington, DC-based Worker Rights Consortium (an independent labor rights monitoring organization that conducts investigations of working conditions in factories around the globe). Nevertheless, they received no response from Apple.

Can a moral appeal to humanity, and a universal call to guarantee labor rights, be closely linked to the struggle for social justice of Chinese workers?
Conclusion

Apple celebrated the tenth anniversary of iPhone’s debut on 9 January 2017 – *iPhone at Ten: The Revolution Continues* (Apple, 2017). Wait. Viewed from the perspective of workers, we must ask: what’s worth celebrating? Are workers who produce the most profitable product in the electronics world enjoying improved working and living conditions? Have they secured fundamental labor rights including collective bargaining, the right to strike, and to organize autonomous unions at Apple’s suppliers all over the world? SACOM marks 2017, the year of the global anti-sweatshop campaign, *iSlave at Ten: The Campaign Continues* (Chan, 2017).

Foxconn workers, as a notable example, have gained some support of students and scholars, workers, and consumers in Greater China, the United States, Mexico, and the world. The challenge of labor has also compelled the stability-obsessed state to make certain concessions, such as the increase of local statutory minimum wages and the betterment of the conditions of the most vulnerable workers (Chan and Selden, 2017; Pringle, 2017). It is crucial for workers, and their supporters, to carry on their collective struggles to build a more just society.

Corporate and state strategies to date have effectively restricted worker activism to the local level (Friedman, 2014; Lee, 2016). The core question remains whether Foxconn workers and their counterparts in workplaces throughout China will succeed in strengthening their protests as part of a national and global labor movement. That would of course require not only the growth of Chinese labor struggles, but labor struggles and support movements centered on the developed countries as well as the Global South.

Notes

1 Tian Yu is her real name. Her attempted suicide was reported in local Chinese media.
2 Jenny Chan and Mark Selden’s Skype interview with the Apple University researcher on 9 August 2016.
3 Unless otherwise stated, our research team interviewed Tian Yu during summer 2010 in Shenzhen city, Guangdong. Translations ours.
4 The Foxconn Employee Handbook is on file with the authors. Translations ours.
5 QQ is a Chinese instant messaging program owned by the Chinese corporate giant Tencent. QQ.com hosts an online community of hundreds of millions of users, most of them Chinese.
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The poems written by Xu Lizhi were translated into English by Matthew A. Hale and his colleagues, and published on the Nao blog (Friends of the Nao Project, 2014). Xu Lizhi’s poems in the original Chinese are selected and edited by Qin Xiaoyu, entitled Xin de Yi Tian [A New Day], and was published posthumously in 2015 by the Writers Publishing House.

‘Protesta contra suicidios en Foxconn’ [Protest Against Suicides in Foxconn], Guadalajara, Mexico, 10 June 2010. Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ikF9vD3R_A (accessed 19 April 2018) (10 minutes; narrated in Spanish).

References


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