

AGAINST the DAY

Labor in China: A New Politics of Struggle

Ralph Litzinger, Editor

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The Labor Question in China: Apple and Beyond

This collection is part of a concerted effort by activists, NGOs, and academics to make public the poor working conditions in Chinese factories. The essays reflect critically on the consequences of these conditions for Chinese workers and also situate their present situation in the recent history of Chinese labor relations. They also analyze the efforts of Chinese workers to organize and fight for better conditions. In order to appreciate this situation and these developments, however, it is useful first to understand the processes by which the plight of Chinese factory workers and the involvement of multinational corporations in this have been both revealed and obscured in recent years.

In 2010, eighteen workers, all born after 1978, and between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five, attempted suicide at the then little-known Taiwanese company called Hon Hai Precision Industrial Company, now more commonly known as Foxconn; fourteen of these workers died. Within days of each suicide attempt—dubbed the “suicide express” in the Chinese media—images of these workers began to appear in the Chinese press and blogosphere, and soon in the Western press (Zhongguo jingji wang 2010; Pun and Chan 2012). Foxconn responded by putting up safety nets between factory and dormitory buildings on its factory complexes and by bringing in professional psychologists to counsel workers who, management believed, had hidden and troubled psychological problems, which supposedly predated their arrival on the factory floor. It was as if suicide in a factory setting could not have anything to do with the conditions under which these young workers toiled—the long hours, the repetitious tasks on the factory floor, the lack of overtime pay, the crowded dormitory spaces, the alien-

ation from home, and the empty modernity promised through a life of urban factory living.

It soon became clear that Foxconn made a vast assortment of electronics for many multinational corporations, including Apple, Dell, HP, and others (China Labor Watch 2012; China Labor Bulletin 2012; Pun and Chan 2012). Several journalists, activists, and NGOs brought international attention to Apple's central role in China's factory systems and export growth model. Every iPad and iPhone, every glistening screen and beautifully honed aluminum casing evidently was connected in some way to Foxconn or some other obscure company on Apple's supply chain. From Hong Kong to Beijing, labor and environmental health activists began to speak out, through protests, press conferences, and published reports (for an example, see Students and Scholars against Corporate Misbehavior 2010, 2011). Smartly designed graphic images featuring the Apple logo, such as *iSlave*, were circulated across the Web. The world's hippest company, with its brilliant, driven, vegan, gurulike CEO Steve Jobs, with its sexy, user-friendly, and dreamy utopian products (meant to outshine the bland conformity of Microsoft and the PC), was suddenly connected to the global politics of the electronics sweatshop, connected, that is, to labor conditions that, many China watchers believed, would never be tolerated in the United States or Europe. Throughout the 2000s, as Jobs made his heroic comeback and silently outsourced much if not all of Apple's production to China, Apple honed an image of itself as a pedagogical innovator, a responsible global corporate citizen (Apple n.d.). With the Foxconn suicides, and through press reports, investigative journalism, and activists groups such as Hong Kong's Students and Scholars against Corporate Misbehavior, Apple was now directly connected to young workers from rural China, to kids surrounded by the specter of death.

I was in Beijing during the summer of 2010 (while the Foxconn suicides continued) and during the spring of 2011, studying alternative schooling for migrant children on the dusty outer ring roads. Designed to guarantee migrant children their right to the compulsory middle school education, these schooling projects often end up preparing students to enter China's factory or service labor system. Some students end up working itinerant family farms or sorting through recycled waste, while a small minority go on to high school and then college, but rarely in Beijing. During my fieldwork in 2011, I learned about a coalition of environmental, health, and labor NGOs—led by the Friends of Nature, Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs, Green Beagle, and other groups around the country—that was doing

its own investigative reporting and asking questions about Apple's health and environment record in China. After several years of imploring Apple management to meet with members of the coalition to discuss working conditions on their supply chain and after repeatedly being ignored and rebuffed, the coalition went public with a major report—"The Other Side of Apple"—detailing the struggles of sick workers. The report revealed that forty-nine young men and women were poisoned at the Lianjian Technology factory in Suzhou Industrial Park by the toxic chemical n-hexane, used to wipe clean the iPad display screens and speed up efficiency (Friends of Nature, Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs, and Green Beagle 2011a). Because the factory, to save money, did not provide proper ventilation during the cleaning process, workers developed neurological problems, the loss of motor function, and experienced numb limbs; others complained of constantly fainting and being overcome by a debilitating fatigue. Some of these sick workers were eventually bought off with a lump payment of 80,000 or 90,000 yuan (\$12,000–\$14,000), but only after signing an agreement stating they would not bring claims against Apple or its supplier companies in the future.

I was able to meet with some of these activists, pore over their reports, and watch video footage of the visits to factory sites and hospital beds. Journalists began to pay attention. With the suicide express still fresh in the news, they suddenly wanted to talk about Apple, Foxconn, and labor and health conditions in China's factories. I went on CCTV's *Dialogue* show to talk about Apple and its record in China (CCTV 2011). Then the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami hit Japan on March 11, 2011. The Apple story was over. Western journalists left the country to cover the unfolding disaster at the Fukushima 1 nuclear power plant. Because China, too, at the time had an aggressive development plan for nuclear generation, the activists and researchers connected to these NGOs and the emerging Green Choice Initiative were deeply concerned with what was happening in Japan, and some turned their attention to learning more about the largely secretive nuclear power industry in China. But many continued to do additional investigative work on Apple's labor politics, this time focusing more centrally on industrial waste and runoff from factories into rivers, lakes, and village and community water systems. In August 2011, another report was published, "The Other Side of Apple II" (Friends of Nature, Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs, and Green Beagle 2011b). Apple ignored it and, according to many activists, continued to refuse to address its record in China.

The Apple story took a twist in 2011. Through the work of Students and Scholars against Corporate Misbehavior, which had its own group of

researchers and activists working out of Hong Kong and China and under the pressure of the Green Choice Coalition based in Beijing and a handful of Western journalists who began to pay attention to Green Choice's reports and do their own reporting (Duhigg and Barboza 2012), Apple shifted its approach. Some members of the coalition were flown to Apple's headquarters in Cupertino, California, for secret meetings. Promises for more transparency were made, though members of the coalition were not to be invited to observe factory conditions first-hand. Soon thereafter, Apple hired the Fair Labor Association in Washington, DC, to conduct an audit of all of Foxconn's factories. The association produced an enormous document based on visits and interviews in eight different factories and found numerous violations of Chinese labor law (Fair Labor Association 2012). After the death of Jobs, under the leadership of Tim Cook, and with the Fair Labor Association now Apple's selected watchdog, Apple promised to live up to its own corporate responsibility codes. Promises were made: across-the-board raises, shorter overtime, better health insurance, and worker's compensation in the event of injury. Some of these promises have been kept. Many have not.

Enter Mike Daisey and his one-man theatrical show, "The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs," first performed by Daisey in the summer of 2010. Nationally known as a provocative monologist, Daisey traveled to China and stitched together his observations and interviews, his reading of published reports (including those mentioned above), and Western journalistic reporting into a powerful indictment of Apple, supply chains, consumer fantasy about technology, and the ethics of consumption. Daisey never performed "The Agony and the Ecstasy" based on a fixed script. His style was to actively reinvent, revise, and improvise at each performance to produce different points of emphasis and effect. Daisey memorizes the broad contours of his story and then wings it; at the end of the performance, audience members are given a "reverse program," a kind of action sheet with information on how to put pressure on Apple and other electronics manufacturers. Soon Daisey and his story caught the eye of Ira Glass, host of the public radio program *This American Life*. An excerpt of the Daisey monologue was aired on January 6, 2012, and quickly became the most listened-to show in the history of the program (*This American Life* 2012a).

The exposure of the great "Daisey lie" was the handiwork of the Shanghai-based *Marketplace* correspondent Rob Schmitz. Some of the facts in Daisey's performance—as excerpted on *This American Life*—didn't add up, Schmitz has argued (Schmitz 2012). Schmitz went in search of Daisey's translator. He eventually tracked her down in Shenzhen. Her memory was at odds with Daisey's. She had no recall of guards with guns, no memory of

workers organizing in Starbucks, no thirteen-year-old workers, no memory of meeting young workers with hands shaking from the effects of n-hexane. Schmitz reported his findings in the press, and in March 2012 Glass aired show #460, “Retraction” (*This American Life* 2012b). Daisey, who had presented himself as something of a journalist-activist, was exposed as a fabricator of truths about the politics of labor, life, and death in China. Daisey became the story. Apple, Foxconn, the suicide express, poisoned workers, shady buyouts of sick workers, dormitories that operate almost as prisons, fires in Chengdu factories, worker protests and grievances—all this was swept aside.¹

In the US and Chinese press and in some circles of the documentary theater world, Daisey will never be forgiven. He will not be forgiven for his blurring of truth and fiction, for his journalistic posturing, for what some see as his arrogance to play the activist provocateur and tell us how we should relate to Apple and its dirty and dangerous supply chain. In Hong Kong and Beijing, among the activists and researchers who first began to delve into supply chain politics in China, feelings about Daisey are mixed. Some see him as a courageous activist who played with the facts in order to get the story out, a story that had to be told, and a story that many felt was once again being ignored in the wake of Jobs’s death and the Fukushima disaster. Others want the story to return to what Daisey intended all along: the political exposure of the labor, environmental, and health records of the world’s richest electronics company. Apple is, after all, a company that claims, in its annual corporate responsibility reports, to be one of the most caring, most progressive, and most active companies in the global fight to ensure workers’ safety and health and decent working conditions.

For activists I know working on Apple’s labor politics in China, this is the great lie. Among all the companies in the dense and intricate electronics supply chain, among all the multinationals in the industry, Apple is a master at blurring truth and fiction—through its advertising, its Genius Bars, its secrecy, and its brilliantly spun corporate responsibility reports. What the work of labor activists in the People’s Republic of China and Hong Kong shows us—through their reports, demonstrations, and behind-the-scenes pressure—is that labor is one of the most explosive issues in China, that the body of the laboring subject is worked to the bone, hands get crushed in machines, neurological defects are real for those who suffer them, and workers get sick and then tossed out, returned to the streets, or sent home, with little or insufficient compensation. They remind us that Apple’s profits soar and its market share in East Asia increases because it tolerates and supports Foxconn and many other suppliers’ “race to the bottom” production strategy.

As the essays in this section show, however, China's workers are not docile subjects. Nor do all workers complain of living a life of misery, as some journalists have argued, especially those most critical of Daisey (see, for example, Culpan 2012; Chang 2012). China's new generation of workers is increasingly educated and gives voice to a range of desires and perspectives about the state, its relationship to global capital, and the ways of life, living, and labor along different points of the supply chain hierarchy (see Tsing 2009). They have acquired unique organizing skills, some learned through histories of labor organizing during the socialist period, some acquired through social networking platforms and other transnational and transregional connections (Phillion 2007; Au and Bai 2012). They are also disrupting production. In late September 2012, for example, a "riot" broke out at the Foxconn Taiyuan facility in Shanxi, shutting down production for three days. Workers used smartphones to distribute scenes of the protests on the Internet, using the very tools they produce to circulate their grievances. As China becomes the epicenter of global labor struggles, workers are not acquiescing (Friedman 2012). They are fighting for higher wages and humane working conditions, increasingly through direct and, at times, violent confrontation.

Finally, the recent story of activism against Apple asks us all to think more critically about where the technology we use comes from and how it is produced, circulated, consumed, and deployed. Even those who take to the streets in London, New York, or Cairo and who occupy the banks and the parks, buy, use, and sometimes celebrate Apple as the company that made us all *think differently* (Levine 2012). How we understand our relations to the technologies on which we now depend and deploy—and the labor politics of the companies that make these technologies—should be central concerns in any discussion about labor, health, social, and ecological justice movements today, in China or elsewhere.

Note

- 1 Shortly after the retraction, Daisey (2012) posted a royalty-free, downloadable script on his website.

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