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Decoding the New Generation of Chinese Migrant Workers

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May 2010 has been dubbed as “the month of strikes and suicides of workers” by the Chinese media. More than 20 strikes within a month has been recorded², from taxi drivers in Dongguan city against the police’s unfair prosecutions, strike of workers at ex-state owned enterprises’ (Henan Pingmian Textile Company) for better compensation package, to Japanese automobile producer Honda’s Chinese factories for pay-rise and reelection of trade union. At the same time, a string of suicides broke out in the Taiwanese-owned iPhone producer Foxconn, with 13 cases of suicides (two attempted) happening in its Shenzhen factory since the beginning of the year.

Comments such as “sweatshop-like factories”, “evil foreign investors”, “the young generation of migrant workers cannot survive the hardship of factory life”, are almost found spontaneously in all media. However, if we try to study the whole situation closely, we would find that the factories are indeed not looking exactly like the traditional sweatshops, the hardship of factory life is beyond physical labour, and the subject matter, i.e. young migrant workers, are no longer the same group of people who have been used to be described by the western (or even Chinese) media as “obedient, hardworking, can endure hardship” in the past two decades.

This article, by taking the Foxconn and Honda cases as background, attempts to offer some more understandings of the new generation of migrant

workers and the world they are living in.

The brave new world style “sweatshop”

After the string of suicides broke out, Foxconn, finally opened its formerly-tightly guarded factory gate to journalists, to defend itself against criticism that its 450,000 workers in the Shenzhen factory are working and living in sweatshop-like conditions. Clean and tidy plants, spacious outdoor playgrounds, recreational facilities, wages are in line with the legal minimum wages, free psychological consultation provided and even a total of 60% or above pay-rise promised³, appear on the media. Yet, they failed to keep workers from committing suicide (up to 14 cases by 6 August 2010). What has gone wrong? Or is such a suicide rate simply normal for a community of 450,000 people?⁴ Is it a copycat effect? Or is the rumour that workers trying to secure a better livelihood for their families (as compensation per suicide is reported at 100,000 yuan) by killing themselves, true? If yes, what make them so desperate for money?

Many workers at Foxconn have pointed out that loneliness and isolation, regardless there are some 450,000 workers being employed in Foxconn’s Shenzhen plant, is what they find hard to endure. Most of the young workers come from rural areas, where inter-personal relationship plays an important role in their social life. However, interpersonal relationship, or even communications, is not encouraged at Foxconn. Workers say that they are not allowed to talk at work. While most of them live in the factory dormitory, workers from the same shift, or the same department, would not be assigned into the same room. Some call it as military management, while some suspect, such an arrangement is to avoid workers building up friendship or further more, getting organized.

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² Some bloggers have listed the strikes since January 2010. The numbers in May and June are significantly higher than the previous months, see <http://info.wenweipo.com/?action=viewnews-itemid-27788>. According to a report from IHLO, “The (Honda) strike has shifted the paradigm of wage regulation from legislation to industrial actions. Strikes and demands for higher wages were cried for in more than a hundred enterprises in Guangdong after the Honda strike”, see <http://www.ihlo.org/LRC/W/000710.pdf>.

³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10252344>

⁴ The suicide rate of China (released by WHO, updated in 1999):

http://www.who.int/mental_health/media/chin.pdf, for the age groups of the Foxconn workers, the suicide rate is between 6.9 and 15.1 per 100,000.

The discipline at Foxconn is also reportedly very tight. "We have to arrive 10 minutes before our shift starts, to meet up for evaluation. We are not allowed to speak to our colleagues at work. The supervisors can yell at us in public if we make any mistake. I have been a worker for 3 years and have never been so tired. What is wrong with talking with others? It helps me relieve stress. Foxconn is treating us like robots.", a young worker said.⁵

To make the situation worse, the security guards at Foxconn are the nightmare of workers. Foxconn employs veterans as security guards and they have the right to search, interrogate and punish workers. Bullying at workplace is not uncommon.⁶

Foxconn says that it is in line with the legal minimum wages and intends to increase it. However, workers are not impressed. They know what comes with the "high wages". "Our daily output quota has been increased. Previously we had to press 3,500 computer casings every shift. Now the quota has been increased to 3,750 for the day shift, and 3,900 for night shift," "And we have heard rumours the quota is likely to be raised even further in the future.", as a worker told the newspaper.⁷ What does it mean for such a quota? An 8-hour shift has 480 minutes. After deducting one meal time of 30 minutes and a 20-minute break per shift, it means a worker has to press 9 to 10 computer casings per minute, so it won't surprise us that the Foxconn workers are so tired and feel that they are treated like robots.

In order to achieve such a high output quota, so that they are entitled to the pay scale, workers have to do overtime, often up to 12 hours per day. The legal minimum wages⁸ is set so low that they must work overtimes to reach 2,000 yuan per month, an amount which is barely "survivable" in the prosperous city like Shenzhen. Many workers said they have never used the recreational facilities provided by the factory, because they do not have time or they are too tired after a long day of work. In a way, Foxconn resembles to "a modern concentration camp which gives you basic food

and accommodation".⁹

Therefore, there is a rumour that some workers are asking about the "price" (the compensation of each suicide) and some might kill themselves for money. "The math works like this: the average employee earns about 2,000 yuan per month (after overtime), but the company pays 100,000 yuan compensation to the family of anyone dying on site. To an unstable 20 year-old, the thought of that much money going to their parents could be attractive."¹⁰

Overtired, loneliness, lack of respect and desperation are closely linked with these young people's choice to end their lives.

The strategy of Honda strike

The situation is quite the same in another foreign invested company, Japanese Honda's subsidiaries, apart from the disciplinary control is not as tight there. Two workers, Xiao Tan and Xiao Xiao, who do not want to use their real names, decided to resign after realizing that there would not be any prospect for them in Honda. But they said they wanted to do "something meaningful" before they leave.

On 17th May, instead of operating the machines as usual, they turn off the machines and shouted to their fellow workmates, "with such a low wages, we shouldn't work." Quickly, they were joined by their co-workers and started a peaceful sit-in on a basketball court of the factory, a basketball court which they had no time to play at.

Xiao Tan and Xiao Xian initiated the strike in one factory, and it spread to all four subsidiaries of Honda in the region. The key of its success is on the use of sms and online forum. The workers wrote down the date they intended for strike (calling it "the date for a walk") and send sms to other departments when their own has entered the strike.

Though the strike ended with only a partial success, i.e. 11% of pay-rise and 33% increase on meals and lodging subsidies, this strike is considered as a long lasting and well organized one in the recent years, which exposed the problems in the automobile industry and the abusive use of interns.

The mass and abusive use of interns

Among a total of more than 1,800 employees in

⁵ Quoted from a young female worker who plans to resign from Foxconn, Mingpao Daily, 30 May 2010 (in Chinese).

⁶ http://www.china.org.cn/china/2010-05/21/content_20091811.htm

⁷ http://www.china.org.cn/china/2010-06/07/content_20199987.htm

⁸ The monthly legal minimum wages (of a standard workweek of 40 hours) of Baoan District, Shenzhen City is at 900 yuan before July 2010. After then, it has been raised to 1,100 yuan.

⁹ Mingpao Daily, 30 May 2010.

¹⁰ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10182824>

the factory, 80% of them are student interns from technical schools with an internship contract. They are not protected by the labour law and their basic wages is as low as 560 yuan per month, which is lower than the minimum wage level, and they are not covered by any social insurance. They work long overtimes to boost their wages, but after deducting lodging and food, they get around 700 yuan per month. At the same time, they have to pay tuition fees to their schools, from 2,500 yuan to 5,000 yuan per semester, while they are working at the factories, which means what they earn would not even be able to cover the tuition fee. Interns can become regular employees only after they finished one year internship and obtained a diploma. Even these interns become regular employees the wages is only 1,000 Yuan per month.

The schools and factories work along as a supply chain of cheap labour. The schools advertise that they have good linkage with famous foreign invested companies, such as Honda and Panasonic, and could secure employment for their graduates. Attracted by the promise of becoming technicians and skilled workers in those famous plants, many farmers save up and borrow money to send their children to technical schools.

After arriving at the plants, young workers are very frustrated as they discover they learn nothing new in the Honda subsidiaries, "we absolutely agree that it (Honda) is an advanced sweatshop. Our biggest regret is, we are here for nothing, we learnt nothing here. The so-called training is some tedious tasks which anyone can learn and be good at, in a day or two." workers told the journalists.¹¹ "The teachers came to tell the interns, if you go for a strike, you are breaking the (internship) contract, if you break a contract, you have to pay for it."¹² Technical schools, internship and employment, the educational institutes and factories have become the same interest group, at the expense of these young workers and their families' hope.

Apart from pay-rise, another demand from the Honda workers is that they want to re-elect the trade union. The current union is reportedly not representing the workers, especially the interns, i.e. the majority, to fight for their rights and was at some point, beating up workers during the strike. However, the demand was not met at the end of the strike.

The mentality of the post-1980s migrant workers

Jumping for a quick conclusion to explain the deaths at Foxconn and the frequent strikes, many factory owners would claim that the young people do not treasure their lives and could not endure hardship as their parents, the previous generation of migrant workers did. One has to realize that more than 20 years have passed, since the first generation of migrant workers arrived at the cities. Recent statistics shows that among the 150 million migrant workers, some 60% of them are born after 1980s, in many coastal cities, post-1980s and post-1990s migrant workers make up 80% of the migrant workers' population. Even the Beijing government started to address them as "the new generation of migrant workers", a term first appeared in the official document in February 2010.¹³

The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences called them "better educated, with higher career expectation, more demanding on material and spiritual life, lower endurance at work". Professor Chang Kai from Renmin University described them as "tend to pursuit justice determinately"¹⁴, Professor Guo Yuhua of Beijing University also said, "this generation knows how to use modern communication technology; they are very sensitive of social justice, much more sensitive than their parents used to be."¹⁵

The young migrant workers are also being described as "rootless". Most of them change their identity from students directly to workers and are not familiar with farm work. The majority of them would not consider returning to their villages to settle down as farmers, as an option. They expect to become citizens and get disappointed, and even desperate, when they realize they could not, by working in the de-skilled positions (even in the IT sector, like in Foxconn or automobile industry, like in Honda) and earning such low wages. By committing suicide, or taking part in a strike, the young workers are voicing out their anger, against the systems at factories, as well as the social injustice, the general low wages and impotent trade union.

This will inevitably have an impact on China's development, on foreign investment (as reportedly in August 2010, Foxconn plans to cut down a

¹³ In Chinese:
<http://news.163.com/10/0201/09/5UE6R9TR0001124J.html>

¹⁴ In Chinese:
<http://business.sohu.com/20100722/n273696052.shtml>

¹⁵ Yazhou Zhoukan, Issue 23, 13 June 2010 (in Chinese).

¹¹ Yazhou Zhoukan, Issue 23, 13 June 2010 (in Chinese).

¹² Yazhou Zhoukan, Issue 23, 13 June 2010 (in Chinese).

workforce of 150,000 in Shenzhen), as well as on the labour movement. The All-China Federation of Trade Unions, the only legal trade union recognised by the Beijing Government, is often described by workers as the “yellow union”, will it be able to change, and change fast enough, to represent the workers better, or will the Chinese workers have to defend themselves with their bare hands?

With better knowledge on their rights and the use of technology, the young Chinese workers would definitely continue to surprise the world, if not shock, with their actions and struggles. Yet, hopefully, it is not paid by the high price of their freedom and lives.

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