

# Worker-Intellectual Unity: Suicide, trans-border sociological intervention, and the Foxconn-Apple connection 労働者、インテリゲンチヤ共闘 国境を越える社会学的介入と富士康・アップル社の連携

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## Abstract

What are the implications for global public sociology and labor studies when more than a score of Foxconn workers jump to their death and when a wave of protests, riots and strikes occur in their wake? This article documents the formation of a cross-border sociological intervention project and illustrates how sociological research fueled regional campaigns that gradually developed into a global campaign. This experience confirms the important political contribution that social science can make when linked with grassroots politics. The authors shed light on how social and economic injustice was creatively challenged by combining the strengths of workers, researchers and transnational movement activists. The study uses both quantitative (semi-structured questionnaires) and qualitative (in-depth interviews and participation observation) methods to gain insights concerning the experiences, world views and collective agency of Chinese workers who are struggling to make sense of the global production regime they inhabit and to contest the forces that shape their working and social lives.

## Keywords

China, Apple, Foxconn workers, suicide, public sociology, labor studies, global production, transnational movements

## Introduction

At about 8 a.m. on 17 March 2010, a 17-year-old worker, Tian Yu, went to the window of her fourth story dorm room at the Foxconn factory in Shenzhen and jumped. Tian Yu survived. Many more would follow Tian Yu in attempting to end their lives even as global consumers raced to consume new generation electronic products as if there was no tomorrow. Within 12 months, 18 young rural migrant workers attempted suicide at Foxconn facilities. The workers who attempted suicide ranged in age between 17 and 25 – the prime of youth. The responsibility for this tragedy and the larger tragedy of China's workers is not Foxconn's alone, although, as the manufacturer of more than 50% of the world's electronic products, it is an enormous player. The problems extend far beyond the factory floor to the profit squeeze that Foxconn and other multinational producers have to face from the world's leading giants such as Apple, Samsung and Microsoft. This article introduces a three-year experiment in public sociology in China involving researchers and activists from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan that was sparked by the spate of suicides of Foxconn workers in 2010 and subsequent worker struggles. This experimental project attempted to understand the lives and struggles of China's new working class comprised overwhelmingly of young rural migrants through the lens of Foxconn and its relationship to Apple and the Chinese state.



**Foxconn workers flood in and out of the Longhua factory in Shenzhen, Guangdong. Hon Hai Precision Industry Company, known by its trade name Foxconn, is headquartered in Taipei. (Photo credit: University Research Group)**

It is useful to cast contemporary struggles in light of the linkages forged between workers and intellectuals in the course of China's revolution. China has a modern history of worker and peasant bonds to organic intellectuals. In the May Fourth era of 1919–1927, students and teachers played active roles in the worker, peasant and anti-imperialist upsurge that led to a surge of strikes and boycotts that coincided with the rapid growth of Communist and Nationalist movements. In 1921, revolutionary students including Deng Zhongxia, a student of Peking University, and his classmates set up a workers' evening school in Changxindian, a suburban area of Beijing that was near a French-owned railway company where workers suffered from extreme exploitation. Half a year later, the students joined a historic strike at Changxindian (Kwan, 1997). At that time, many progressive students became workers, playing

key roles in the formation of trade unions throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

Students and intellectuals played important roles in conducting labor surveys, collecting worker's oral histories, providing education programs for workers and participating in organizing strikes and protests. The newly formed sociology department at Shanghai University in 1922 focused on labor studies and the labor movement in China's great industrial city. At that time, there was no room for 'politics' divorced from 'science,' as Burawoy argues in his article, 'Making public sociology: Its pitfalls and its possibilities' (Burawoy, 2011).

Chinese sociologists in Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Guangzhou and other cities conducted detailed surveys on workers' incomes, work hours, daily expenditures, rental costs, family consumption, children's education and other subjects of importance to the nascent labor movement. Factors including the workers' industrial sector, place of origin, place of work, gender, age and household members were all documented and analyzed, resulting in detailed labor studies and surveys on the conditions of Chinese workers in the 1920s and 1930s. They are classics of Chinese labor sociology (Li, Xia and Huang, 2005).

The era in which Chinese intellectuals and workers lived and worked closely together has long past. Sociology as a discipline was officially abolished in China in 1952, condemned as a 'bourgeois' social science. Despite an abortive effort to revive it in 1957, its resurrection on new foundations did not begin until 1979 – this time in the service of reform and internationalization, the foundations for a 'harmonious' modern society as envisaged by Deng Xiaoping (Cheng and So, 1983; Yan, 2004). Under the banner of modernization, globalization and professionalism, Fei Xiaotong, the renowned Chinese sociologist, led sociology on a new

trajectory in the 1980s. In mainland China, within these parameters, sociological voices today are more visible in media and in public debates than their counterparts in the West. In this light, sociology in China is inherently imbued with a public nature – but not always in a progressive direction, due to its close linkage with the state.

In light of modernization and globalization and the shift from revolution to reform in the post-Mao era, most Chinese sociologists, in ways familiar to contemporary American sociology, have prioritized 'science' over 'politics,' promoted the discipline as 'value-neutral,' and replaced Marx's class analysis with Weber's stratification lens. Michael Burawoy has drawn attention to the global commodification of education and knowledge within which sociology as a social 'science' prioritizes quantitative research over qualitative studies, claiming the former are more 'scientific' and marketable. Indeed, many quantitative studies are offered to corporations in the form of market surveys. In China, this type of sociology is known as 'professional sociology.' Training elites, providing corporations with market surveys and providing the state with data on income, consumption and stratification characterize the discipline of sociology in China as elsewhere. Within contemporary Chinese state capitalism – with deepening links between private and international capital and the state – scant space remains for practicing reflexive and critical sociology.

Could *global public sociology* find a place and contribute to a progressive rebirth, placing the interests of Chinese workers and farmers at the center of the discipline? What is certain is that China, like others, will not escape the implacable logic of capital accumulation, commodification and the subordination of labor to capital and the state. China, now arguably the workshop of the world with an economy heavily dependent on international trade, will not be spared the impact of the contemporary

global crisis. Disruptive power, as described by Frances Fox Piven (2014) could emerge when the time is ripe. In mainland China, due to the link between sociology and state, it is imperative that public sociology be reborn as critical sociology or critical sociological intervention, as a few Chinese sociologists at Tsinghua University and elsewhere advocate. If that is to happen, the links to state and capital have to be lessened and those to workers, farmers and grassroots groups strengthened. Autonomous, reflexive and critical approaches have to be developed. These pose huge challenges, of course. Will it require a social crisis for these developments, or can we discern the possibilities of a public sociology in embryonic form? Consider the case of Foxconn, Apple and China's rural migrant workers.

### The public statement on worker suicides

When 'the ninth Foxconn worker' committed suicide on 11 May 2010 (the number of attempted suicides at two major facilities of Foxconn in Shenzhen had apparently increased since January), a number of Chinese sociologists and students called a meeting to discuss possible actions. In response to the tragedy, some of us suggested immediate action. For years we had been talking about critical sociological interventions. But when, and how? We made two decisions: first, we issued a public letter calling on Foxconn and the Chinese government to act decisively to end this series of tragedies and to protect the rights and lives of the younger generation of migrant workers. Second, we prepared to conduct thorough research on Foxconn in various regions in order to understand the root causes of worker suicides and their relation to the global supply chain and production system. In mid-May, the semester had not yet ended and students were busy taking examinations or writing theses. Nine sociologists decided to issue a preliminary statement, and once the semester ended this would immediately be followed up with a sociological survey and field

studies. On 18 May 2010 the statement was released. It reads, painfully:

From the moment they [the new generation of migrant workers] step beyond the doors of their houses, they never think of going back to farming like their parents. In this sense, they see no other option when they enter the city to work. 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 new generation of migrant workers faces a serious identity crisis and, in effect, this magnifies psychological and emotional problems. Digging into this deeper level of our societal and structural conditions, we come closer to understanding the 'no way back' mentality of these Foxconn employees.

The sociologists had many considerations in drafting the statement, but among them two were particularly significant. The first was whether the statement could be reported and quoted by mainland Chinese media and whether it could navigate through the control and censorship of the press and electronic media by the Chinese government. This concern affected the wording and the presentation of the statement. The other consideration was how to effectively react to Foxconn, whose public responses to workers' suicides were uniform: the nine young workers who attempted suicides (seven had passed away by mid-May) suffered from individual psychological problems such as poor mental health, depression, distress over heavy debts or family and other personal problems. Foxconn hired western and Chinese psychologists and psychiatrists to defend it in the wake of the plague of worker suicides at the company. They chose statistics as their first line of defense: nine jumps or attempted suicides in five months among a population of more than 500,000 was still far lower than the national suicide rate, they responded, ignoring the fact that the

suicides took place at a single company in a single city, and the victims were in the prime of youth.

The statement was a first reaction to Foxconn, in hopes of bring structural – rather than personal or psychological – factors to the forefront of the public agenda. Many of the nine petitioners had previously conducted research on migrant labor issues in China in an attempt to highlight the social injustices experienced by migrant workers. We argued that with the process of incomplete proletarianization that shaped the migrant labor force that had become the core of China's new working class, the root of the worker suicides lay in the combination of exploitation in a global production system and an uncaring society which denies rural migrants urban citizenship rights and bars them from organizing. Many among the estimated 260 million rural migrant workers, including the Foxconn employees, are being thrown into a state of deep contradiction. They reject the regimented hardships their predecessors silently endured as cheap laborers and second-class citizens. They rebel against their marginalized status and meaningless life. Hence, we argued that 'throwing bodies through the dormitory building' is an act of frustration – and of defiance. In their defiant deaths, the workers call on the Chinese nation – and international society – to wake up before more lives are sacrificed. We argued:

In the absence of effective channels of expression and association, the suicide jumpers chose to sacrifice their lives as a means of accusation. Neither in China nor internationally should anyone have to make sacrifices of this kind. Was it suicide or murder?

At the time of this open letter, students and labor non-governmental organizations created blogs dedicated to the Foxconn worker victims and their families, with the theme song 'Grief' spreading quickly through the web. Across the



straits, more than 300 Taiwanese issued another open statement and on 13 June 2010 they held a press conference in Taipei to condemn Foxconn management and its brutality toward mainland workers. A few Taiwanese sociologists pointed out that this was the first time that Taiwanese scholars from two different political camps, the pro-unification and independence forces, joined together to issue a public statement. Benefiting from a more open and democratic society, Taiwan scholars issued a set of demands to Foxconn, Apple, and the Chinese government:

To Foxconn [its Taiwanese-owned parent company, Hon Hai Precision Industry Company], we ask for an end to military discipline in the factory as well as the dormitory, the improvement of working and living conditions of the workers and the establishment of a humane production line process.

Multinational companies especially Apple should take responsibility for the tragedies that have occurred at Foxconn. Poor conditions, low wage levels and the inhumane mode of labor discipline of Taiwanese companies have much to do with the price competition of global brands such as Apple, HP and Dell.

We urge the Chinese government to raise the statutory minimum wage to a level that meets the basic needs of urban living, to abolish the household registration system under which people are segregated into 'the local' and the 'the outsiders.' We also ask for a labor union reform which could guarantee shop floor labor representation and the establishment of a rational mechanism for collective bargaining.

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 was set up in the summer of 2010.



**Taiwanese researchers' press conference on 13 June 2010 called on Foxconn: "End to sweatshop" and "Defend labor and human rights." (Photo credit: University Research Group)**

This ongoing sociological research on Apple and Foxconn is a trans-border project. The meteoric rise of Foxconn as the world's largest electronics manufacturer has been hailed as a model of East Asian manufacturing prowess that is illustrative of China's dynamic export-oriented industry. Foxconn indeed stands out as a new form of global industrial capital because of its speed of capital accumulation and its scale of expansion to all regions of China. Today, Foxconn has a workforce of more than 1.4 million, and at its biggest production facility at Shenzhen Longhua in south China, it has more than 400,000 young workers assigned to day and night shifts on the assembly lines. It is a key node in the global production network where assembly and shipment of finished products to global consumers continues around the clock, 365 days a year.

The tragic suicides – emblematic of myriad labor problems at the workplaces that produce the world's most sought after products, as well as the strength of a survivor like Tian Yu – prompt us to dip into the Chinese and global context of international electronic capital

(Chan, 2010; Chan and Pun, 2010). The focus of our attention is a new generation of Chinese workers, their lives, their struggles, their hopes and dreams. It is also the American and global electronic giants who design and market the products we cherish and their responsibility to protect the workers who produce them.

### The political context

At the peak of the suicide cluster in the spring of 2010, Chinese governments at provincial and lower levels communicated their concerns. On 26 May 2010, after the '12<sup>th</sup> jump,' a Shenzhen municipal government spokesperson announced that the government would take steps to 'improve laborers' living conditions and enterprise management,' and, soon after one more attempted suicide on 27 May, Guangdong provincial party secretary Wang Yang stated that 'the Party, government organizations and Foxconn must work together and take effective measures to prevent similar tragedies from happening again' (quoted in Li, 2010). However, the specifics of the joint measures – if any – were never disclosed.

Our research reveals that rather than analyzing and taking actions to overcome the root causes of suicides, Chinese officials moved to ban 'negative' reporting about Foxconn in the press as well as online (*China Digital Times*, 30 May 2010):

28 May 2010: 'About the Foxconn incident, on the Internet, other than *Xinhua*'s domestic general information, there should be no other reporting. ... All related content before the 12<sup>th</sup> jump should be locked up. ... All websites must complete the cleanup task tonight. Do not have any dead corners.'

29 May 2010: 'For the front pages of news websites and news center pages, blogs, micro-blogs, there should be no news related to "Foxconn" except from official sources.'

While sociologists in Hong Kong and Taiwan

face few constraints in exposing the issues related to the Foxconn suicides, mainland Chinese sociologists and students face censorship and media control. The banning of news about the suicides by the Chinese government created intense anxiety among Chinese sociologists and students. The need to conduct field research on Foxconn workers' conditions was pressing. Despite the risks, sociologists and students launched a large-scale investigation in the summer of 2010.

### A collective investigation

In June 2010, faculty and students from 20 universities in mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong set up a University Research Group on Foxconn. The universities include Peking University, Tsinghua University, Renmin University, Sun Yat-sen University, Taiwan National University, Taiwan Tsinghua University, Tunghai University, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Polytechnic University and others. Together with SACOM (Students and Scholars against Corporate Misbehavior), a Hong Kong-based labor group formed by students and scholars concerned about labor rights issues in mainland China, researchers joined forces to conduct independent investigations of Foxconn's labor practices and production system. This is the first time that sociologists and students from the three Chinese societies have come together to conduct joint research, sharing common concerns over labor rights issues driven by Apple and Foxconn (Pun and Chan, 2012, 2013; Pun *et al.*, 2012, 2013a, 2013b; Chan 2013; Chan, Pun and Selden 2013).

We were worried about the political sensitivity and the risks involving mainland researchers. When 40 of us arrived at Shenzhen Longhua from different parts of the country and abroad, after basic training on the company profile, interview skills, research ethics and personal safety, we divided into smaller teams, settling

at different hostels and carrying out interviews and surveys in the Longhua and Guanlan industrial communities, where the two mega factories of Foxconn are based.



**40 students and scholars from Hong Kong, China, and Taiwan take part in research skills training preparatory to conducting fieldwork in Foxconn factories, worker dormitories, and public spaces. (Photo credit: University Research Group).**

The research was mainly done as Foxconn workers – easily identified by their uniforms and staff cards – left their workplaces for lunch and dinner and during their rest days. During meal times, tens of thousands of workers poured out to the streetside food stalls. We also targeted workers changing shifts from day to night or night to day, the gap hours between shifts providing time to conduct in-depth interviews. And, we visited nearby clinics and hospitals to interview injured workers, who told us about how they had been injured and their grievances. Every day for two consecutive weeks, our study started around 11 a.m. and lasted until 10 p.m. Group meetings and discussions on the findings of the investigation began at 10:30 p.m. With heated debates, these

meetings, conducted separately among Taiwanese, Hong Kong and mainland Chinese groups, lasted until midnight or early morning. In addition, we had two general meetings to discuss the progress and difficulties we faced, in which the scholars and students from all three areas came together.

Surprisingly, throughout the summer we encountered no direct intervention from Foxconn or the local state. To supplement surveys and in-depth interviews, 14 mainland Chinese students entered Foxconn for one month to work as frontline workers and collect first-hand information about conditions in the plants and workers' lives. Altogether, in the first phase between June and December 2010 we interviewed and surveyed workers and managers at major Foxconn factory complexes in nine coastal and inland cities where the company's factories were then concentrated: Shenzhen, Shanghai, Kunshan, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Tianjin, Langfang, Taiyuan and Wuhan (see Map 1). This resulted in a research report on Foxconn, released in a press conference at Peking University on 9–10 October 2010. A copy of the report was sent to Foxconn, Apple, the State Council of the People's Republic of China, and the All-China Federation of Trade Unions. In the second phase of our research, beginning from March 2011 to the present, we interviewed workers, student interns, teachers (in charge of internship programs), managers, and local government officials at three new Foxconn factories in Chongqing, Chengdu, and Zhengzhou, and revisited our interviewees in the nine cities.



**Map 1. Foxconn's Locations in Greater China**

**Sources: Foxconn Technology Group company websites.**

**Note: Foxconn has more than 30 factories across the Chinese mainland.**

In all, the University Research Group collected 2,409 questionnaires through snowball sampling and conducted 500 interviews between 2010 and 2013. The second report targeted the use of student interns as a new, cheap and expendable form of labor in Foxconn in the process of rapid expansion and called for the legally mandated protection of student laborers.

### **Apple's corporate image: 'Care and commitment'**

How has Apple responded to the Foxconn workers' suicides and subsequent worker actions including protests and strikes? Can Apple contribute toward a global labor movement supportive of workers' rights?

In February 2011, Apple released its Supplier

Responsibility Progress Report to show the remedial measures taken by Foxconn, its largest supplier, in the aftermath of the suicides. Apple's (2011: 19) 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 and other corporate leaders of the global electronics industry association moved swiftly to resolve the public relations crisis, seeking a quick fix while ignoring the structural problems of labor relations and the fundamental production conditions that gave rise to the epidemic of worker suicides. None of the 'remedial measures' mentioned such core issues as speedup, compulsory overtime work, dangerous conditions in Foxconn factories, humiliation of workers and illegal practices associated with the use of student interns as workers. In this self-policing - or more accurately public relations - mode of corporate social responsibility, most importantly, Apple failed to address issues that arose from its own high pressure ordering practices, which contributed directly to blatant rights violations by Foxconn and other supplier factories.

Indeed, the fundamental problems have remained intractable not least because Apple's public calls for reform have been accompanied by continued pressure from Apple on Foxconn to meet high production quotas and to accept lower payments for its products.

Apple's success is predicated on its ability to provide innovative products to meet ever-changing consumer demand. Tracking demand worldwide, Apple adjusts its production forecasts daily. As Apple CEO Tim Cook puts it, 'Nobody wants to buy sour milk' (quoted in



Satariano and Burrows, 2011). Streamlining and controlling the global supply chain on the principle of 'competition against time' is Apple's supply-chain management's goal. Our studies show that compressed delivery time of new products has repeatedly taken precedence over protecting workers' health, safety and rights, at times with tragic consequences. As a result, simultaneous with stepped-up audits, tremendous pressure for suppliers such as Foxconn to cut corners continued and intensified.

### **Foxconn's promise**

In the more than three years since the suicide wave, have Foxconn managers taken meaningful actions to assure the welfare of workers? The 2010 company report touted high corporate ideals framed in terms of a 'people-oriented leadership style that promotes sustainability, stability, development, technology, internationality and responsibility for the advancement of social welfare and the human good' (Foxconn Technology Group, 2011: 6). The statement of the Foxconn Global Social and Environmental Responsibility Committee reads (Foxconn Technology Group, 2011: 1):

Foxconn renewed its commitment to 'respect employees, ensure continuous improvement, contribute to the well-being of society and achieve sustainability.' In pursuing transformation of its management style, Foxconn has raised its standards in employee fringe benefits, provided additional recreational activities and assisted employees in coping with workplace stress.

From July 2010, facing dual pressures from the international criticism following the suicides and the tight labor market in Shenzhen, Foxconn raised the basic wage of its production operators in Shenzhen to 1,200 yuan (US\$190) a month, that is, 9% above the statutory local minimum wage. This still meant that if a Foxconn worker wished to buy Apple's lowest-

priced iPad at US\$499, it would cost about two months' total income, including overtime premiums.

As of mid-2011, the basic monthly wage of assembly-line workers was 1,350 yuan (US\$213) in Chengdu and 1,550 yuan (US\$245) in Shenzhen, the other surveyed Foxconn factories falling within this range. The regional variations reflect differences in China's minimum wage by locality. In December 2013, as Foxconn's entry-level workers' wage was increased to 1,800 yuan a month (US\$285) in Shenzhen, Foxconn accelerated to relocate to new plants in Zhengzhou and Chengdu where the minimum wage was lower.

Foxconn also declared that it would reduce excessive overtime from some 100 hours per month, close to three times the 36-hour legal limit for overtime, to 80 extra hours a month; in other words, close to a 60-hour work week (i.e., a normal 40-hour work week plus 20 hours of overtime).

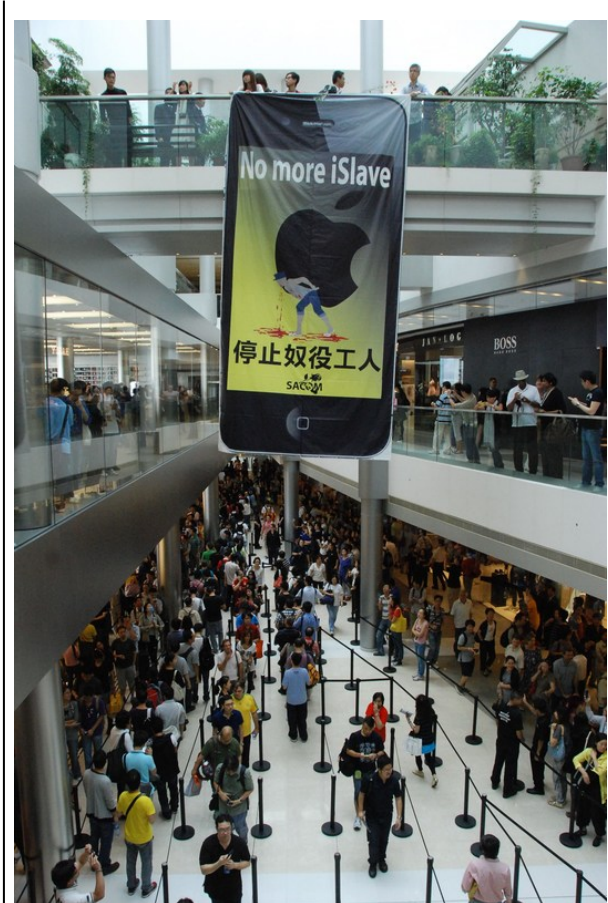
In March 2012, following the release of the Apple-funded Fair Labor Association (FLA) investigation report based on survey data provided by more than 35,000 workers at three Foxconn facilities (in Longhua, Guanlan, and Chengdu), Foxconn stated that it would rectify the most serious abuses noted. Specifically, it pledged to cut excessive compulsory overtime, and promised to move toward full compliance with Chinese labor law, which stipulates that no worker will labor for more than 49 hours per week (i.e., a 40-hour week plus nine hours of overtime, or 36 hours per month of overtime). This is an important benchmark. But will it really be honored in the face of pressures from Apple and other electronic giants to meet quotas on demand?

### **Trans-border practice and the global campaign**

Given the work and study pressures that most sociology faculty and students face during the

semester, a trans-border campaign – which gradually evolved into a global one – the involvement of SACOM was critical. SACOM suggests that Foxconn is not the only company that must be held accountable for the violation of labor rights. The dire plight of the workers at Foxconn was equally the product of pressures from its major client, Apple. From May 2010 to December 2013, SACOM released six investigative reports on Apple and Foxconn.

In response to the spate of suicides at Foxconn, SACOM organized a Global Day of Remembrance for Victims of Foxconn on 8 June 2010, the date of Foxconn International Holdings' (a wholly-owned subsidiary of Foxconn Technology Group) shareholder meeting in Hong Kong. The Netherlands-based GoodElectronics and makeITfair joined the campaign to mobilize their partners in the European network to protest against Foxconn. Labor groups and trade unions in Mexico, India, and other developing countries organized actions to demand that Foxconn reform its military-style management method. SACOM's partners in the United States also held protests in San Francisco, Boston and New York to demand justice for the Foxconn victims. In addition, the US-based United Students Against Sweatshops, Labour Start, Chinese Progressive Association, China Labor Watch, and other groups launched petitions calling on Apple and Foxconn to end the abuses at Foxconn. Thousands of people supported these actions.



**SACOM (Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior) unfurls a 6-meter tall banner from the third floor of the Hong Kong Apple Store in the International Finance Center on Opening Day, 24 September 2011. (Photo credit: SACOM)**

The media coverage of the poor working conditions at Foxconn was remarkable. The plight of Foxconn workers was reported by *The South China Morning Post*, *AFP*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The New York Times*, *Al Jazeera*, *Daily Mail*, *The Age*, *Spiegel Online*, *The Huffington Post* and dozens of international media outlets.

The 2011 aluminum dust explosions that took

worker lives at Foxconn (Chengdu) and Pegatron (Shanghai), the abuse of student interns as operators, the excessive working hours during peak seasons, and above all, the proliferation of workers' protests, strikes and riots have fuelled the campaign on a transnational scale. A comprehensive report by *The New York Times* in January 2012 triggered a movement by consumers in the United States (Duhigg and Barboza, 2012). Online petition groups such as Change.org and SumOfUs initiated petitions targeting Apple's unethical labor practices. In addition to online petitions, the groups called on supporters to present the 250,000 signatures to Apple stores in different cities in early 2012. A civil society network in the United States was built to promote the consumer campaign targeting Apple.

### Concluding remarks

What are the implications for global public sociology and labor studies when more than a score of Foxconn workers jump to their death and when a wave of protests, riots and strikes occur in their wake? This article documents the formation of a cross-border sociological intervention project and illustrates how, through the mobilization of SACOM and others, sociological research could fuel regional campaigns that gradually developed into a global campaign. This experience confirms the social and political contribution that social science can make even under authoritarian conditions.

We challenge the conventional idea that social studies can or should be divorced from the researchers' core values and political vision. We attempt to bring about new understanding of the relationship between global production and worker resistance in China, about university education and about the goals of researchers. We also shed light on how social and economic injustice can be creatively challenged by combining the strengths of workers, researchers and transnational movement

activists.

We use both quantitative (semi-structured questionnaires) and qualitative (in-depth interviews and participation observation) methods to gain insights concerning the experiences, world views and collective agency of Chinese workers, who are struggling to make sense of the global production regime they inhabit and to contest the forces that shape their working and social lives. In the course of our research, we documented labor strikes, protests and riots in various Foxconn facilities and dormitories. These collective actions as well as legal challenges are now confronting the Foxconn and Apple managements.

The labor struggles staged by Foxconn workers, while thus far dispersed and short-lived, have spread across China. With new factory operations in west and central China, a substantial portion of rural workers are being recruited from within their home provinces and even their home towns or prefectures. We anticipate that the forms of labor resistance for rural migrants will change as they work closer to their native places and have the opportunity to draw on local social networks. The sociocultural politics of place can be important. There is potential for Chinese worker activism to grow to a regional or national level.

At the time of this writing, the movement is continuing. Workers go out on strike, SACOM and other labor groups build solidarity networks to support the workers' struggle, and sociologists are writing a book for the general public as well as carrying out comparative research across regions in China. Reigniting the tradition of intellectual-worker unity, more mainland Chinese university students are working on production lines during their summer vacations to understand and document the life-world of workers' hardships and struggles. A number of young graduates have moved to live in local industrial communities,

offering education programs and organizing cultural activities for Foxconn and other workers. These engagements on the ground aim to facilitate the formation of an emergent worker community organization. A critical approach to public sociology is slowly taking root in China. If it flourishes, its implications will extend far beyond China to the world.

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## Résumé

Plus d'une vingtaine de travailleurs de Foxconn ont mis fin à leurs jours en sautant du haut de leur logement, entraînant une vague de protestations, d'émeutes et de grèves. Quelles sont les implications de tels événements pour la sociologie publique globale et les études sur les ressources humaines? Ce chapitre décrit la création d'un projet d'intervention sociologique transfrontalier et illustre comment la recherche sociologique a attisé les campagnes régionales et conduit progressivement à leur transformation en une campagne mondiale. Cette expérience confirme le principe selon lequel la 'science sociale' ne devrait jamais être séparée de la 'politique'. Nous mettons également en lumière comment l'injustice sociale et économique a été mise au défi d'une manière créative par une combinaison de la force des travailleurs, des chercheurs et des activistes d'un mouvement transnational. Nous utilisons à la fois des méthodes quantitatives (questionnaires semi-structurés) et qualitatives (entretiens en profondeur et observation de la participation) pour obtenir un aperçu des expériences, des opinions mondiales et du système d'organisation collective des travailleurs chinois, qui ont du mal à donner sens au régime de production mondiale dans lequel ils vivent et contestent les forces qui façonnent leurs vies professionnelle et sociale.

## Mots-clés

Chine, études sur les ressources humaines, mouvement transnational, sociologie publique globale, travailleurs de Foxconn

## Resumen

Cuáles son las implicancias para la sociología pública mundial y los estudios laborales cuando más de una veintena de trabajadores de Foxconn salta hacia su muerte, dejando una ola



de protestas, disturbios y huelgas a su paso? Este capítulo documenta la formación de un proyecto de intervención sociológica transfronteriza e ilustra cómo la investigación sociológica impulsó las campañas regionales que se transformaron gradualmente en una campaña global. Esta experiencia confirma la premisa que 'las ciencias sociales' nunca deben separarse de la 'política'. Asimismo, aclaramos cómo se desafió con creatividad a la injusticia social y económica al combinar las fuerzas de los trabajadores, los investigadores y los activistas de movimientos transnacionales. Empleamos métodos cuantitativos (cuestionarios semi-estructurados) y cualitativos (entrevistas exhaustivas y observación de la participación) para obtener percepciones respecto de las experiencias, las visiones del mundo y la capacidad para actuar en forma colectiva de los trabajadores chinos, quienes luchan para encontrar el sentido al régimen de producción global en el que habitan y para responder a las fuerzas que dan forma a sus vidas laborales y sociales.

## Palabras clave

China, estudios laborales, movimiento transnacional, sociología pública global, trabajadores de Foxconn

## Notes

1. The nine signatories of the open statement dated 18 May 2010 are: Shen Yuan (Tsinghua University), Guo Yuhua (Tsinghua University), Lu Huilin (Peking University), Pun Ngai (Hong Kong Polytechnic University), Dai Jianzhong (Beijing Academy of Social Sciences), Tan Shen (China Academy of Social Sciences), Shen Hong (China Academy of Social Sciences), Ren Yan (Sun Yat-sen University) and Zhang Dunfu (Shanghai University). In [Chinese](#); translation in [English](#) in 'Dying Young' (23 May 2010) and 'Appeal by Sociologists' (26 May 2010).

2. The petition dated 13 June 2010 was initiated by Thung-Hong Lin (Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica) and You-ren Yang (Department of Sociology, Tunghai University). In [Chinese](#).

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