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# Worker–intellectual unity: Trans-border sociological intervention in Foxconn

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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 premise that ‘social science’ should never be separated from ‘politics.’ The

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authors also 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, Foxconn workers, global public sociology, labor studies, transnational movement

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. Yet many more have followed Tian Yu's attempt to end her life even as global consumers race to consume new generation electronic products like 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 a critical approach to 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.

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 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 and where workers suffered from extreme exploitation. Half a year later, the students joined a historic strike at Changxindian (Cheng and So, 1983; 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 (Minguo Shiqi Shehuidiaocha Congbian, 2005). 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.

The era in which Chinese intellectuals and workers lived and worked closely together has long past. Sociology as a discipline was officially abolished 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 the 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, China's most renowned 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 and, for example, offering market surveys to corporations, if not to the state. 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 the 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 and commodification and the subordination of labor to capital and the state. China, now the workshop of the world and 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 (this issue) 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**

When 'the ninth Foxconn worker' committed suicide on 11 May 2010 (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; over many 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,<sup>1</sup> and once the semester ended we would immediately launch a sociological survey and field studies. On 18 May 2010 the public 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 done solid 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 does not allow migrant workers to organize. Hundreds of millions of migrant workers like 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? In this case, the evidence suggests that suicide was tantamount to murder.

Together with this open letter, mainland students and labor non-governmental organizations (NGOs) 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 to condemn Foxconn management and its brutality toward mainland workers.<sup>2</sup> 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, the Chinese government and consumers:

To Foxconn [its parent company, Hon Hai], 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. ...

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.

Third, 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. ...

Finally, we urge consumers to boycott iPhone 4G until the working conditions of its manufacturing factories have genuinely been improved.

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. This critical or public sociological research on Apple and Foxconn was a trans-border project. 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. 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 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 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 ‘12th 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’ (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 (*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 12th 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, if not anger, among Chinese sociologists and students. The need to conduct in-depth field research on Foxconn workers' conditions was pressing. Despite the risks, sociologists and students launched a large-scale investigation in June 2010.

## **A collective investigation**

Since mid-July 2010, faculty and students from 20 universities in mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong have joined to form 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 and Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Together with SACOM (Students and Scholars against Corporate Misbehavior), a Hong Kong-based transnational campaign group, more than 60 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 a joint research, sharing common concerns on the labor rights issues driven by Apple and Foxconn (see Pun and Chan, 2012; Pun et al., 2012).

We were worried about the political sensitivity and the risks. When 40 of us arrived at Shenzhen Longhua from different parts of the country and abroad, after a 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. In the early stages, before we were assured of our safety and had become familiar with the industrial community and its environment, we dared not pair up mainland students with Taiwanese students in a small 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, 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 more 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



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

Surprisingly, throughout the summer we encountered no direct intervention from Foxconn or the local state. To supplement survey 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. This resulted in a University 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 (ACFTU).

### **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 and/or the consumers of its products 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) 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. (2011: 19)

None of the 'remedial measures' addressed such core issues as speedup, illegal levels of 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, Apple failed to address the issues that arose from its own high pressure ordering practices, which contributed directly to blatant rights violations by supplier factories. In short, Apple distanced itself from all responsibility.

Apple and other leading corporate members of the global electronics industry association moved swiftly to resolve the public relations crisis in a quick fix while ignoring the structural problems of labor relations and the fundamental production conditions that gave rise to the epidemic of worker suicide. Indeed, the fundamental problems have remained intractable not least because Apple's public calls for reform have been accompanied by continued private 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' (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, whatever the stepped-up audits, the tremendous pressure for suppliers such as Foxconn to cut corners continued and intensified.

### **Foxconn's 'new' promise**

In the more than two 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):

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. (2011: 1)

From 1 June 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 1200 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 1350 yuan (US\$213) in Chengdu and 1550 yuan (US\$245) in Shenzhen, the other 10 surveyed Foxconn factories falling within this range. The regional variations reflect differences in China's minimum wage by locality. In February 2013, Foxconn announced a wage increase to 1800 yuan (US\$285) for entry-level workers in Shenzhen, but at the same time Foxconn started to relocate to Zhengzhou and Chengdu where the minimum wage was lower and it was possible to recruit student interns as cheap labor.

Over these two years, 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 nearly 20 hours of overtime). In late 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, Foxconn stated that it would rectify the most serious abuses noted. Specifically, it pledged to cut excessive compulsory overtime and raise wages. By July 2013, Foxconn 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**

In order to check on fulfillment of the promises made by Apple and Foxconn and generate continuous pressure on them, the University Research Group conducted a second phase of research from March to December 2011. In addition to revisits to Foxconn factory complexes in Shenzhen and Kunshan, we investigated conditions in three new Foxconn complexes in the central and southwestern provinces, into which it was expanding in the search for increasingly scarce labor.

In the third phase, from January 2012 to the present, we have worked closely with local scholars and done in-depth studies of Foxconn plants in Shenzhen, Chengdu (exclusive production of iPads) and Zhengzhou (exclusive production of iPhones). In all, we collected 2409 questionnaires through snowball sampling and conducted 500 interviews with former and current Foxconn workers and managers about their working and living conditions. The University Research Group on Foxconn released two more reports upon the completion of each phase of investigation. The second and third reports squarely 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 (Pun et al., 2012)

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 – could hardly be achieved without the involvement of SACOM, the Hong Kong-based labor group formed by students and scholars concerned about labor rights issues in mainland China. Since its formation in 2005, SACOM has been tracking Foxconn's labor practices. SACOM suggests that Foxconn is not the only company to be blamed. The dire plight of the workers could not be sustained at Foxconn without the connivance of its major client, Apple. Within two years, 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. GoodElectronics and makeITfair joined the IT campaign. Both GoodElectronics and makeITfair mobilized their partners in the network to protest against Foxconn. At that time, labor groups in Mexico, Germany and Taiwan organized actions to demand that Foxconn reform its military-style management method. Other SACOM 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 (USAS) and Labour Start launched petitions calling on Apple and Foxconn to end the abuses at Foxconn. Thousands of people supported these actions.

The media coverage of the poor working conditions at Foxconn was remarkable, especially in Europe. The plight of Foxconn workers was reported by AFP, *The Guardian*, Al Jazeera, *Daily Mail*, *The Age*, *Spiegel Online*, *The Huffington Post* and dozens of international media outlets. Throughout 2011, many more labor NGOs based in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Europe and the US took concerted action to organize a global campaign.

The explosions at Foxconn (Chengdu) and Pegatron (Shanghai), the abuse of student interns as operators, the excessive working hours during peak seasons, the militarized training of new workers and above all workers' strikes and riots have fuelled the campaign on a transnational scale. A comprehensive report by *The New York Times* triggered a movement by consumers in the United States. Online petition groups such as Change.org and SumOfUs initiated petitions targeting Apple's unethical labor practices. In addition to traditional 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 for the Apple campaign.

## 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, sociological research could fuel regional campaigns that gradually developed into a global campaign. This experience confirms the premise that 'social science' should never be separated from 'politics.' 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 labor actions are now challenging the Foxconn and Apple managements. These labor struggles, while thus far dispersed and short-lived, are spreading 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 form 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. Neither ‘pessimism of the intellect’ nor ‘optimism of the will’ offer insight into possibilities of this kind.

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 sociology students have departed from their elite career paths by moving to live in local industrial communities, offering education programs and organizing cultural activities for Foxconn 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.

## Funding

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## 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). See the full webtext at *Sina Tech* [in Chinese]: [tech.sina.com.cn/it/2010-05-19/13214206671.shtml](http://tech.sina.com.cn/it/2010-05-19/13214206671.shtml).
2. The petition was initiated by Thung-Hong Lin (Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica) and You-ren Yang (Department of Sociology, Tunghai University). It is available (in English) at: [sites.google.com/site/laborgogo2010eng/](http://sites.google.com/site/laborgogo2010eng/)

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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