

China: 15 years as a student, mother, and Foxconn worker

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Ten years since the Foxconn suicides, Mainland Chinese workers continue to suffer under the company's exploitative practices.

2020 marks ten years since the Foxconn suicides. The 18 successive suicides of young workers and the uncovering of conditions on Foxconn's shop floors in 2010 set off a media storm of public controversy. But Foxconn, Apple, billionaire chairman Terry Guo, and consumers like us have more or less cast the deaths to the back of our minds. Foxconn's exploitation of workers continues to profoundly alter the courses of their lives.

The rural migrant workers born into the millennial generation are no longer a "new generation," if they ever were. Departing from home as teenagers to eke out a living, most are now middle-aged, sandwiched between obligations to care for their parents as well as their children. Not only have their youth and vigour been whittled away by a lifetime of manual labour, this new age has not cut these workers any slack: they face increasing pressure to burn themselves out for a future that does not belong to them.

34-year-old Zhi Ying—not her real name—began her life as a labourer in December 2005, when she was sent from her trade school to a Foxconn factory. At the time, Foxconn was a popular destination for workers. Though known far and wide as a "sweatshop" after [a string of worker suicides](#) between 2009 and 2010, and regularly criticized for its [harsh, militarized management](#), many workers still considered it a better option than the smaller factories that paid lower wages—when they paid them at all. This competitive "advantage"—being the least brutal sweatshop on the block—allowed Foxconn to [maintain control](#) over its workers.

"The end of the year is when you really needed to watch out," Zhi explained. "If you didn't listen or your performance slipped, you would be gone by New Year's. They call it 'optimizing' the factory flow. It happened to five percent of workers every year."

"For a couple years there, it was just really scary," she said. "You're constantly scared of being fired. At the time, you had to spend a pretty penny just to get in the door at those factories. I got in through my school, and had to spend a couple hundred *yuan* to do so. But there's also transportation, expenses, you know? In some cases, the fee to get into the factory might not cost that much. But I've also heard of cases of people paying more than a thousand *yuan* to get in. (The minimum wage for a factory line worker at the time was 690 *yuan* a month.) It wasn't easy to get into Foxconn in those days. They only wanted people under 24—any older than that and they didn't want you."

Zhi Ying arrived at Foxconn with 19 other classmates. They still had six months before their official graduation, but the school was anxious to send them on their way and to collect its "finder's fees" from both the factory and the students. The school administrators were not concerned with taking

responsibility for their pupils' education: in any case, the students were headed for careers with absolutely no connection to what they had been studying anyway. In turn, Foxconn also frequently employed "[student workers](#)" who were not only smart but also obedient, easy to manage, and cheap. It's hard to imagine a better target for exploitation.

'I had never suffered through anything like that': A first foray into Foxconn

"Back when I first started at Foxconn, I just cried for days," Zhi said. "At home I had never suffered through anything like that." Upon first entering the factory, she was assigned a job on the production line. Each shift was 12 hours, from 8am to 8pm. Other than half-hour meal breaks at noon and dusk, she had to stand the whole time. "When I first arrived, I had no idea—I just had a pair of shoes with small heels that I had brought from home. After a day of standing, my feet were really feeling it, let me tell you."

"Once I was off work, it was still a half-hour walk back to where I was living, so I would take off my shoes and walk home barefoot. After a couple of days, I finally had some time off to go buy a pair of cloth shoes. Those days, I'd be on my feet for a dozen hours or so, nodding off over and over again in the afternoon. I couldn't help it, so I'd just pinch my hand to try and stay awake."

"Transitioning from just being in school, everything came at me pretty fast. You're like a robot: in the same place day after day, repeating the same motion thousands of times over. Other than eating and going to the toilet, all your time is spent staring at those products. Back then the management was pretty strict," Zhi explained. "You couldn't even grow out your fingernails. If they grew out even a little bit, you'd hear about it. Whether it was someone from quality control, a plant inspector, or the line manager—everyone and their uncle would tell you off."

"The cafeteria was a battlefield in those days. You only had 30 minutes. There were a ton of people, lots of cutting in line. Sometimes people would lose their cool, and if you got in a fight you didn't get to eat."

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Although Zhi Ying only worked on the production line for a few months, her memory of the experience remains fresh, 15 years later. The repetitive, high-pressure work environment, and the fear of harsh and controlling managers, left behind an indelible impression. "I definitely didn't want to do any of it. I'd rather have less money and to have to work harder elsewhere than to go back to that factory."

Right when Foxconn's rapid expansion and extremely repetitive and stifling production line work had been leading to high rates of turnover in 2005 and 2006, then-19-year-old Zhi Ying was gaining seniority. Owing to her brisk and efficient disposition, she was quickly promoted to line manager. Working as a line manager provided her with more independence—no longer required to robotically stand for hours on end, she could come and go as she inspected the production lines. But she also began to assume new responsibilities.

"You had to finish all of your daily work. You needed to keep an eye on your appearance, and you definitely needed to stay on top of safety standards. There couldn't be any problems with product quality whatsoever—if a customer complained because of some faulty product, that would get written up and recorded. You also had to get along with the employees. When workers consistently don't follow orders and cause problems, that's the biggest challenge."

As a major player in the manufacturing industry, Foxconn relied on extracting higher and higher profit margins from its workers. Other than adding extra shifts and cutting down on mealtimes or bathroom breaks to extend working hours, “cutting edge” industrial engineers planned out workers’ every movement to achieve maximum levels of efficiency. The company also reduced worker pay through complex promotion and wage systems.

“Before, you had to pass a test to get a pay raise. It wasn’t based on your title,” Zhi said. “The first year I worked as a line manager, they told me I couldn’t take the test because I hadn’t been on the job a full year. The second year, I didn’t pass the test. The third year you’re guaranteed to pass, so after passing I immediately received a 500 *yuan* management stipend and my base pay rose by a few hundred *yuan*.” In short, for the first two years Zhi Ying worked as a line manager and assumed all of the responsibilities associated with the role, she wasn’t receiving a line manager’s pay.

“These workers face increasing pressure to burn themselves out for a future that does not belong to them.”

“I remember the period when the suicides were really at their worst—I had just started working as a foreman. I was headed for another building to draw up plans for an additional workshop with another foreman on the same shift. Just before I entered the room, a man had jumped from the dormitory—the other foreman saw it happen with his own eyes. It scared the hell out of him.”

Five years in and recently promoted to foreman, Zhi Ying increasingly struggled to understand fellow workers who, unlike her, were unable to bear the repetitive work. “If you can do the job, do it. If you can’t manage, you can always move on. Why would you kill yourself?” she said. “I didn’t understand it then, either.”

In truth, there were many workers who “couldn’t manage” and left—of the 19 classmates who arrived with Zhi Ying, only two remained after the first year. But for some workers, leaving wasn’t really a way out. Among the extremely limited choices of factories, Foxconn was already considered a relatively “good” option.

As for the frontline workers who could be castigated at any moment for the smallest infraction, their so-called “dignity” was continuously crushed into pieces. Their bodies, their every movement, were subject to the surveillance and scrutiny of people from quality control, plant inspectors, line managers, and foremen. They were molded into component parts best suited to the rhythms of mechanized production. Becoming cogs in a machine, their emotions, their experiences, the pain and numbness of their bodies, all remained invisible. And so they jumped, [over a dozen people](#) whose stories remain untold to this day.

Motherhood on the factory floor: Assembly lines don’t care whether you’re pregnant

Zhi Ying’s first child arrived in 2014. Following her maternity leave, she quickly became pregnant with her second child. Pregnant bodies aren’t made for the production line.

“When I gave birth to Miao Miao I was still managing the assembly line, but I couldn’t handle it once I was pregnant again,” Zhi explained. “The production department isn’t very flexible. When you’re on-site overseeing things, there’s noise, there’s dust. You’ve got to manage the workers. If something goes sideways, you need to handle it. You’ve got to maintain production capacity while ensuring everyone’s safety. Every day you need to be on-site constantly, running back and forth. But when you’re pregnant, things get complicated. It’s not ideal when you’re constantly asking for leave to go to a maternity check-up.”

The production line doesn’t let up just because a worker happens to be pregnant, nor will operations

be temporarily suspended if a worker needs to look after a sick child. It's common for frontline workers to leave the production line after giving birth.

"Anybody who hasn't had children simply can't understand," Zhi said. "They think you're just taking up somebody else's spot. On the production line, there's almost nobody who would bring their kid with them to work, from what I've seen. Usually it's only the office workers, or a foreman here and there."

'You're like a robot: in the same place day after day, doing the same motion thousands of times over.'

To spare her children the fate of those left behind by their migrant worker parents because they could not afford to look after them and work at the same time, Zhi Ying applied for a transfer to do office work as a production manager. Much of the office work at Foxconn happens in the Peripheral Department, with the word "peripheral" alluding to the limited room for advancement and regulation of overtime in these roles, as well as the lower pay. All things considered, Zhi said she felt her new boss was "pretty good-natured."

"Sometimes I had to ask for time off, and he'd just say, 'Go ahead.' A few times I'd ask for a couple hours' leave, and he'd just let me go and come back without filing any paperwork." Although this relatively independent work arrangement allowed her to take care of her family, it came at the cost of opportunities to advance in the workplace. "I said to my husband: if it wasn't for the kids, I wouldn't be in this position. You're just stuck in place because it's so dull and there's no professional growth, no development."

Zhi Ying has already been doing this mundane work for five years. Her two children are about to start primary school. Because her children aren't eligible for public school, Zhi Ying now spends most of her monthly salary of 6,000 *yuan* on tuition and living expenses.

For the last five years she's constantly been looking for an exit strategy, to the point where she's now hoping Foxconn will lay her off. That way, she could use the money from the company's severance package to bring her family back to her hometown and start a small business.

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She's also tried her hand at selling countless products through social media, hawking everything from traditional Chinese medicine to disposable diapers on various WeChat merchant platforms. Aware of the deception behind exaggerated advertising claims like, "Make millions every year by posting to your friends list," Zhi Ying has not invested a lot of money into these schemes, only time. Yet these dubious online enterprises remain one of the better options in her dream of a better life.

In the past decade, Foxconn has climbed from 112th on the Fortune 500 list to be the 23rd today. But its newest generation of workers earn little more than the lowest standard minimum wage, relying on overtime pay before they can attain even the most basic standard of living in the city.

Foxconn describes its corporate culture as one where "you get out what you put in." Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of workers like Zhi Ying, who has diligently and conscientiously tried to eke out a livelihood for over a decade, remain unable to spend time with their children as they grow up. What's being "put in" to the company is the labor of these workers, their youth, their opportunities to spend time with their families, and their very hopes for the future. Compared to what the Terry Guo's of the world get, these workers get nothing.

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P.S.

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