

**Topic:** Study the Triangle Fire in New York in 1911 (watch this PBS video [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1FU8s5LG\\_E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1FU8s5LG_E) and do a bit more research). Compare the labor management methods, factory system, and their nature in Triangle Shirtwaist Factory and Foxconn in Shenzhen in China. Analyze their similarities and differences.

Geography 435 – Spring 2020

Cameron Miller

# Fires of Cotton and Change

An Examination of Chinese Labor compared to the U.S.

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## Introduction

1911 – New York, New York: A fire rages through the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, killing 145 employees (Wignot, 2011). It was a national tragedy that was far from inevitable. The owners of the factory, Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, would fit well as antagonists in a Charles Dickens story.

Even before the fire, they had a nasty history with organized labor; just a few years earlier, they had hired violent thugs to harass organizers. They also took part in a common insurance scheme of the time that involved having “accidental” fires burn off excess product after everyone went home. Very unscrupulous men, “Harris and his foreman lovingly detailed [in court] the long hours of careful thought that went into positioning the sewing machines and designing the cutting tables. But no thought went into the problem of evacuating 500 workers in the face of an explosive cotton fire (Von Drehle, 2018).”

After the tragedy, the two owners actually *profited*, once again due to their infallible insurance policies, which paid out more than the meager fee they offered to victims’ families after their time in court (“The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911 - Aftermath,” n.d.). One of the major causes of death in the factory was the fact that one of the exits was locked, in order to prevent theft, which was a practice that Blanck *continued* to uphold, even despite his defense in court that he did not know the door was locked, and even despite his own loss of family members due to the practice.

2010 – Shenzhen, Guangdong: A sudden spike in suicides in so called “Foxconn City” (“Suicides at Foxconn - Light and death,” 2010) brings international attention to Chinese working conditions, at the massive facility of one of the largest Electronic Manufacturing Services (EMS) companies in the world. Twelve people took their own lives within five months, and two more made attempts. Suddenly, everyone was interested to hear about the low pay, the lack of insurance, the crowded dorms, and the long hours of the migrant workers that found themselves working for Foxconn.

Although these two events happened almost exactly a hundred years apart, and an ocean away, they are related. By 1911, the United States was already leading the world into the Industrial Revolution, and the Fordist-era of industrialization was beginning, with even more sophisticated

machinery and organization to take advantage of it. Cities across America were growing faster than cities ever had before, as people flocked from across the country and world on a quest for work, and a better future. But here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the US has long since shifted its focus from the factories and assembly lines, and China has taken up the mantle. Although the mechanisms and governance of China's new urbanization boom are different than they were for the US, cities have all the same begun to grow rapidly across the PRC, especially along the coastal regions.

These tragedies both exist at a point in time of transition. In the US, the response fundamentally shaped the future, which we live in today. China has been granted the same opportunity to fix the wrongs made plain. In this essay, I will examine the relationship between American and Chinese labor conditions – first in the conditions leading up to and following these two watershed moments. It is hard to characterize one condition as “better” or “worse” than the other, since, as things so rarely are, it is not that straightforward. Then I will examine more of the inner workings of Foxconn and the industry it is part of, before finally looking back to the workers themselves, and what hope we might have for their future.

## Fires and Foxconn – Before and after the tragedies

### Progressive Fire

This time preceding the fire was still the “Wild West” of labor in the US. There was little on the books to protect workers. Child labor, for example, would still be unperturbed until 1938. Migrant workers came from the countryside and across the seas to find work, and many of the latter were met with distrust, be they arriving from across the Atlantic, or the Pacific. By and large, if anybody was going to protect these people, it would have to be themselves, and they had to do it together.

President Theodore Roosevelt was finishing up his term the same year the seamstresses of New York took to the streets – 1909. This was the beginning of the Progressive Era. Yet, beginnings are often humble, as this one was. The public, and certainly the political system, were, at best, ambivalent towards the strikers (Wignot, 2011). While some small shops quickly buckled to demands and became union only, the large and prestigious Triangle factory didn't intend to go down without a quite literal fight. Picketers were met with violence, and police either did

nothing or joined in the oppression themselves. While the workers at the Triangle factory did have some of their demands met, the ultimate goal of unionization failed under this assault.

The later fire, however, inspired much more than ambivalence. It completely changed the American psyche (McEvoy, 1995). Prior to this, industrial accidents were largely naturalized. They were regarded as expected, unavoidable, and acceptable occurrences that were bound to happen amongst group of negligent (often “lesser” foreign) workers, and they certainly didn’t entitle anyone to compensation from the innocent owners. But the horrors of the fire right in the middle of New York were harder to ignore, and the negligence was easier to see. Sadly, this negligence was not enough to convince the jury to convict - likely partially due to the fact they were all fellow businessmen, rather than working class peoples (Von Drehle, 2018) - but it marked a turning point in how the general public, and eventually, the legislative and legal systems, came to see the workplace.

## Reform after Mao

Like in the US, a large part of the growth in China’s cities has been from migrants from the countryside, and they haven’t quite been met with open arms, either. In some ways they are more like the millions sent through the halls of Ellis Island – although they are of China, thanks to the *hukou* system, they are not of the city. Once again, we have a people that are unfortunately left to largely fend for themselves.

That’s where the immediately obvious similarities end, though. Take unionization, for example. By 2012, two years after the suicides, China reported 20% union participation (“20% of Chinese join trade unions,” 2012). This number wouldn’t be reached by the US for another 30 years following the fire (Mayer, 2004). Currently, the percentages in China and the US respectively are roughly 36% and 10% (“Labour relations in China,” 2018; *Union Members – 2019*, 2020). However, the unions occupy a very different space in China than their American counterparts.

The biggest factor here is that all workers are organized under a single union, the All China Federation of Trade Union (ACFTU) (So, 2010). Workers do not get direct control over the leadership – just like with everything else, the CCP gets the final word.

This is part of what I label a conservative labor movement. The Chinese government has expressed a genuine interest in improving the conditions for workers, exhibited by the

unprecedented public commenting period preceding the 2008 labor law, which I will return to shortly. However, the main priority is to maintain social harmony, and thus, the party's own power. The state largely prefers to handle things on a case-by-case basis to avoid anything that could embolden large longitudes of people, or allow for better mass-organization (So, 2010). Disputes are increasingly handled by individual party members and mediators, to avoid elevating problems to the overwhelmed court system (Gallagher et al., 2013). The government, in 2013, spent almost 800 billion yuan in "stability maintenance" to pursue this goal (Chan et al., 2016). These payouts go directly to angry workers to help alleviate their concerns. Migrant workers are surprisingly more satisfied by the current dispute system, according to Gallagher et al., likely due to the fact that their concerns are often simpler, for example relating to unpaid wages.

Assumedly, these are situations that are quite easily dealt with via stability maintenance!

The public is largely willing to at least *play* the same game as the government. There might be some quiet murmurs expressing desire for more fundamental political changes, but publicly, protestors lay the blame solely at the feet of the companies they work for, or corrupt local officials, rather than the central government (Fisher, 2012; Harvey 2019).

This feeds into China's system of *corporatism* (Unger and Chan, 1995), which has seen variants across Asia and the rest of the world. Corporatism can be defined as a system of non-competitive, unilateral, hierarchically organized units that mediate power between the state, and a sector / the people within that sector. In China, this system is directly propped up by the state, via the ACFTU, although it can also arise 'naturally'. Unger and Chan characterize this public demand for this 'conservative labor movement', stating that even that the student movement at Tiananmen Square was, via corporatism, demanding an elitist sort of 'democracy lite'. Rather than pursuing universal suffrage, which would give increased power to the uneducated peasantry, this movement desired "government recognition that people could form and control their own representative associations (45)" and that these associations could exert some power on the country through this corporatist system. So (2010) characterizes the same in the modern movement, as a "rightful resistance" – meaning that people aren't asking for any new rights, and certainly not revolutionary regime change or anything on that scale, but are simply asking to be given that which they believe the law already entitles them to. "The protests are not aimed to challenge the authority of the post-socialist party-state or the existing capitalist system (104)."

As stated previously, the U.S., at the time of the fire, had very few protections on the books. In China, two major labor laws were passed before the tragedy at Foxconn. First, was the 1994 law, which was the first major labor act of the reform era. While an important first step, it still left many gaps (Chan, 1998; Lee, 1999). The law gave a lot of power to management, leaving exploitation of workers as a simple process. Migrants were often held ‘hostage’ – wages or papers would be held in order to keep disgruntled workers from leaving before the end of their contracts, and wages were kept low, creating a large demand to work long stretches of overtime, just to make ends meet.

Then, in 2008, the Labor Contract Law was passed, and not without controversy. As mentioned before, when this bill was first drafted up in 2005, the public comment period garnered almost 200 thousand responses, mostly from workers themselves (So, 2010). However, pushback from many Western corporations, via the American Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai, the US-China Business Council, and the European Union Chamber of Commerce, made sure that the 2006 revision had reduced protections (for example, the final draft of the bill made it so that companies must only *consult* the union during mass firings – earlier, they required *approval*). However, this caused its *own* public pushback, with the press, global labor movements such as the AFL-CIO and the European Metal Workers, various human rights groups and NGOs, and even the European Trade Confederation all speaking out against this flagrant disrespect for human wellbeing in China. Many corporations even took stances against the revisions, with some defending themselves by saying that they never supported them in the first place – the trade organizations that they cooperate with had supposedly made the decision independently. It’s unclear whether these claims were true, or if companies simply wanted to avoid tarnished brands. But either way, perhaps this is evidence of the better fortune the new industrial workers of China have inherited. Decades of organizing have created a global network of labor movements – unions, organizations, bureaucracies. While it will still be an uphill battle to properly secure worker rights in China, the migrants there are perhaps a little less alone than the shirtwaist makers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Then again, the machines of global capitalism are also more well-oiled than ever before.

In any case, the final draft of this bill was a “modest but real step (Costello et al., 2007, 6)” in addressing concerns raised by a rising amount of protests and social unrest. As the name

implies, the focus of the law was in contracts. Chinese workers, particularly migrants, were increasingly ending up in informal employment, where it is hard to guarantee protections. Between 2005 and 2010, the number of contracted local *hukou* workers increased from 65 percent to 71 percent, and for migrants, it went from 12 percent to 34 (Gallagher et al., 2013). However, the increase in contracted migrants has seemed to slow or even reverse in more recent years, with 2016 numbers showing a 35 percent contract rate (“Labour relations in China,” 2018). This is still a vast improvement compared to pre-2008-law levels, but still leaves a long way to go.

Li and Freeman (2015), after surveying workers in the Pearl River Delta across several years, found improvements across the board in unionization, social security, and reduced rights-violations. While, across the world, increased regulations can be seen causing increased labor costs, and therefore less employment, the situation as Gallagher et al. (2013) saw it was still promising. Employment rebounded after the 2009 recession, despite the promises from companies to move in response to the law, and only 15.8 percent of surveyed managers reported hiring less, due to increasing costs. Oppositely, 30.8 percent reported *firing* employees less. The law now requires severance packages, which include a month’s wages for every year of employment. Gallagher et al. also reported that a sizable portion of the workers, including migrants, were satisfied with the law and its implementation, and even those who were ambivalent outnumbered those who were dissatisfied.

So yes, a real step, as Costello et al. said. But protests and unrest continue, and of course, the Foxconn suicides themselves occurred well after this law was passed and the recession recovery had begun. While the law has helped, perhaps due to lack of stronger union negotiations, working conditions themselves still need to improve. And wages are still low enough that the high demand for back-breaking overtime remains high. And, crucially, the geography of social welfare is still ambiguous – do benefits travel between regions? The wrong answer to this question can be devastating to migrants, who choose to or are even sometimes forced to move elsewhere. Foxconn is increasingly looking to move to cheaper inland provinces to avoid cutting into thinning profits, and workers are given the ‘choice’ to relocate with lower pay and loss of benefits, or lose their job entirely (Chan et al., 2016).



## Violence

Besides the protests at the Triangle Factory, the United States has a long and sad history of violence against those bold enough to fight for better treatment. Strikers would face violent opposition, both from privately hired goons, and from government police forces, militias, the national guard, and even the army (Horan and Swiggett, 1951; May and Myers, 2005; Zinn, 1980).

China currently does not seem to have the same tarnished record as the US in this department.

“First, using ‘the rule of law’ and developing a European labor code instead of intensifying the repressive apparatus (like police and prison) to deal with the labor unrest is a positive sign that the post-socialist party-state is committed to transform itself into a modern state.” (So, 2010 p115)

Even against drastic measures taken by Chinese workers, the government response has been somewhat tame. Executives have been held hostage and even killed (Griswold, 2015) for talk of moving or restructuring companies at the expense of their workers. In these scenarios, workers have had their demands met, with no punishment. Sometimes, it is even the rich executives that get locked up. Some consider ending up on various China’s Wealthiest lists more of a danger, than a privilege (Chao, 2013). There are still scenarios where protestors end up imprisoned, but even then, from as far as I can tell at least, the violent response seems much more mellow (Fisher, 2012). I cannot imagine in a million years American workers taking an executive hostage, only to be met with “it’s a private dispute” by officials, as was the case in China (Free, 2013).

## The Rise and Fall of Foxconn

The life of an EMS company is a difficult one. They occupy the unprofitable middle of the consumer electronics supply chain. Making high end components such as computer chips like Samsung, or selling highly marketed personal devices under an owned IP like Apple nets you significantly more money than the people who bridge the two. The work Foxconn does is like a jigsaw puzzle – components are simply pieced together. Because of this, it takes very little training to work in their factories – which is partially responsible for the low wages – and it takes very little capital to open up a new firm – which is partially responsible for the intense

competition. Rather than spending money on expensive machinery or highly educated engineers, you really only need a building for people to work in to begin your own EMS (Müller, 2016).

Foxconn still has an edge due to pure volume. If you need a hundred million iPhones this year, and a hundred million of the new model next year, there's still one place you need to call to fulfill an order that big. But Foxconn's exponential growth has come to a halt. It currently operates at about 2-3 percent profit (as of 2016), despite doubling sales volume between 2007 and 2013 – and this is considered good, for the industry! But all the attention the company received, and the reforms that occurred afterwards, have ensured that Foxconn is no longer the cheapest producer on the block.

Pegatron is rapidly becoming Apple's manufacturer of choice (*Analyzing labor conditions of Pegatron and Foxconn: Apple's low-cost reality*, 2015). While Foxconn's base wages have doubled, hours have been limited to 60 a week, and dorms have been reduced to 8 people per room, Pegatron is not held to the same standards – and that is *despite* Apple's claim to the contrary. China Labor Watch's study (2015) examined pay stubs, which more often than not revealed 60+ hour work weeks, against Apple's mandated 55. The wages at the Shanghai facility only reach 2/3 of the cost of living in the city, so people “willingly” sign up for these excessive hours, just to make ends meet – with some pay stubs having an astounding 132 hours overtime in a single month. Pegatron did all of this at a mere .8 percent profit margin in 2013, compared to Foxconn's 2.8 (Muller, 2016).

Apple has simply moved their problem elsewhere. This is despite the fact that, bizarrely, by selling 20% of smart phones, they have somehow captured roughly 90% of the total industry profit, worldwide (Jones, 2018). If anybody has the luxury of pursuing improved labor conditions, it's Apple. Yet instead, they, along with others, repeatedly shift the burden to someone else.

“Soon after the first wave of suicides of Foxconn workers Apple asked the Fair Labor Association (FLA) in the United States to regularly monitor labour issues at Foxconn, mainly with regard to overtime, health issues, child labour and other legal requirements in China. But of course Apple did not ask the FLA to investigate pay issues at Foxconn, for example if wages without overtime are sufficient to make a decent living. That would have meant changing the distribution of profits between Apple and Foxconn. It is the

same story with customer Microsoft, which demands that its suppliers give paid leave to US workers without any indication that Microsoft would pay for it.” (Muller, 2016 p171)

The focus simply on Foxconn accomplishes nothing. “As two suppliers essentially compete over labor costs, to only demand that one side improve labor conditions is no different than making it sacrifice market share (*Analyzing labor conditions of Pegatron and Foxconn: Apple’s low-cost reality*, 2015 p19).” And sacrifice its market share, Foxconn has.

To make up for this, the company is trying to expand into more profitable sectors, to either of the ends that were mentioned before – sophisticated components, or in-house engineered consumer devices. They have even opened facilities in Wisconsin, although their strategy there is bizarre. Reporters have walked up to the buildings to see they are clearly empty, and have found that no further development plans have been filed with the city - yet the company maintains that the Innovation Center is not empty, and is on the cusp of becoming a busy hub of industry (Dzieza, 2020).

Another possible strategy: it’s likely that the algebra will increasingly favor robots over humans. Foxconn could perhaps get an edge here, due to their volume – they could automate earlier, and even develop their own systems to squeeze out further profitability.

In any case, whether it be due to shrinking market share, a shift to high-skill low-employment work, or increased automation, a lot less people are likely to work at Foxconn in the future. But like with Apple, this really only moves the problem to someone else.

All of these developments stand to say that worker salvation can only come from organization. The companies they directly work for are relatively powerless to enact change, and the companies *they* work for, amongst the wealthiest on the planet, have no interest in setting a new course. The Chinese government seems somewhat receptive, perhaps more so than the U.S government was, to enacting change, but workers themselves must be the ones on making the push. And workers everywhere must join them. The fate of the Chinese migrant laborer is intrinsically intertwined with laborers across our globalized world. Currently, China is part of a “race to the bottom”. Why raise your own nation’s working conditions and wages when it means you won’t be able to beat the “China Price”? And if it wasn’t the China Price, then it would be the Vietnamese Price, or the Bangladesh Price, or as Africa increasingly industrializes, perhaps

the heart of industry will move there. In any case, this problem reaches beyond just China. Again, the problem will just threaten to become someone else's, if improvements are limited to a small geography (even in a geography as "small" as China).

## The Rise of the new Chinese Working Class

In talking with migrant workers in China, David Harvey (2019) found that they didn't consider themselves members of the "working class". During the Mao era, class consciousness was primarily reserved for the state-sector industrial workers. In some ways, their social rights were ahead of those even in the modern US (Lee, 2002; So, 2010) – workers were guaranteed healthcare and housing, for example. But of course, individual and political rights were greatly limited. The term "citizen" was not a common one, as it was seen promoting individualism – a tool to obscure class oppression.

As the reform era came to be, and the 'inefficient' state jobs were cut in favor of private industry, this class lost its status, making way for a brief, but odd for a socialist country, lack of class consciousness. But the people of China are increasingly making claims to "citizenry" that have been denied via the *hukou* (Lee, 2002). The extended discussion between 2005 and 2008 during passage of the labor law made workers very aware of their position and their rights (So, 2010), and they are becoming better at organizing to fight for them. Workers know the periods where production ramps up, and they know that this is the most vulnerable time for companies, and the best times to protest (Chan et al., 2016). Migrant workers are rebuilding class consciousness, which perhaps shows that there is hope for an important tenet of "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" – worker's rights.

## Conclusion

This essay began with a look at a time 100 years passed, and then at another time that feels almost as distant, despite being only a decade ago. Through these events, I've examined the forces, be they capital or socialistic, that have impacted the working people of both great nations of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China. The CCP holds that the most important part of their new socialism is party control. For this ideology to have any coherence, it seems to me that *at least* the second highest priority must then be liberation of the workers. China's unique combination of a strong central state and global capitalism have fused

to make a scenario not quite like we've seen before, but not wholly alien, either. The United States has built itself around the story of the downtrodden migrant making their way to the big city to carve out a better future for them and their children. While we have made many mistakes, and are still far from living up fully to that image, a lot of progress has been made since the fire broke out at Greenwich Village in New York City. China is well equipped to build this same image of prosperity for the formerly misfortunate.

America and China have both soared to a prominent place on the world stage, and their fates are now intertwined more than ever before. On a macro scale, neither nation is happy with the arrangement. The United States is ready to wage a trade war. Companies like Foxconn are increasingly frustrated with their sole reliance on a single American company for all their profit. On the micro scale, it's the workers who face the most turbulence, whether it be the Americans who have their jobs sent overseas, or the Chinese who receive the scraps. We are constantly told in the US to not feel bad for the plate we've given them, "even a few dollars a day is a huge step up" we hear. That may be true. But it's also true that we get charged \$350 for an Apple Watch that costs \$84 to produce (Muller, 2016), so it doesn't seem like the one who's benefiting the most from this arrangement is the little guy.

It certainly seems like change is possible in China, just as it was in the US, despite the oft ugly response American workers were met with. But as I said before, if things improve in China, we can expect the same level of de-industrialization to eventually hit them, as it did us. Will cities like Shenzhen eventually turn into a new Detroit? It's likely that problems will only continue to be moved, first from coastal China to the hinterlands, then outside the country all together. Perhaps we can set up a Moon or Mars colony, and exploit a whole new class of astronaut migrants.

Or, people from across the world can make sure that workers everywhere are protected. Media attention was found to be the ultimate cause for change – it's why Foxconn went through all those adjustments, after all (*Analyzing labor conditions of Pegatron and Foxconn: Apple's low-cost reality*, 2015). That shows that change is possible, when people pay attention. Sometimes it's slow, sometimes its even ugly, but its possible. If I've learned anything in the past two weeks, it is that people power can be astounding, and explosive, and can just come out of

nowhere. I have confidence that the wheel of progress will continue in China. With luck, it will spin faster, and will spin for more places than one.

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