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.’
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.