

1993

In 1993, a fire broke out in a small Hong Kong-owned toy factory in Shenzhen, claiming the lives of eighty-seven migrant workers, mostly young women. In those early days of China's opening up to foreign investors, little was known of the terrible working and living conditions of the migrant workers who had flocked to Shenzhen in search of a living. Dozens of the victims' private letters found in the rubble provided evidence of their plight; their authors complained, for instance, of constant hunger. Labour nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) in Hong Kong publicised the tragic incident and an effective international campaign was launched that linked the big-brand toy companies in the developed world to the exploitation that went on inside their supplier factories in Asia. This not only resulted in the international toy industry recognising a code of conduct drawn up by the Hong Kong labour NGOs, but also led to increased international scrutiny of labour conditions in Chinese factories at both the local and the international levels. In the decades since, Hong Kong NGOs and their counterparts in mainland China have taken on an important role in shaming global companies into putting pressure on their suppliers to improve working conditions.

Voices from the Zhili Fire: The Tragedy of a Toy Factory and the Conditions It Exposed

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'I am now working in another factory. It's better than the Japanese umbrella factory. It's twelve hours work a day. If my factory needs people, I'll let you know.'

Quote from a letter found in the rubble of the burnt-out Zhili Toy Factory

On 19 November 1993, eighty-seven workers lost their lives when the Zhili Toy Factory in Shenzhen caught fire. Their deaths aroused widespread public outrage in China, and the Zhili fire has since been equated to the notorious Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City in March 1911—a tragedy that robbed the lives of 146 young immigrant workers. That fire marked a watershed in US labour law reform and is still commemorated annually.¹ Although the policy impact was not as significant, what happened at Zhili exposed how Chinese migrant workers lived in the early 1990s and the mechanisms that entrapped them in slave-like working conditions.

The Economic and Social Contexts

In 1980 China established its first special economic zone (SEZ), in Shenzhen, which was then a very small city sharing a border with Hong Kong (see O'Donnell's essay in the present volume). As China was still poor and inexperienced in global trade, a new manufacturing model was introduced in the SEZ known as the 'three-plus one' (三来一补) model. Foreign investors, mostly Asian suppliers to Western companies in the global production chain, were invited to build or rent factories to manufacture products for export. The investors then shipped in raw materials and machinery, employed their own foreign technology and product design, and China provided cheap labour. China desperately

needed foreign exchange for its industrialisation project to take off and, as a result, the power relationship between foreign capital and the local Shenzhen Government was lopsided. In such an environment, the investor was allowed to depress wages to a level below subsistence.

As Hong Kong at that time was one of the world's major centres for the production of garments and toys, businesses in what was then still a British colony were the first to rush into the Shenzhen SEZ to take advantage of wages that were ten times lower than in Hong Kong.² Chinese villages in the Shenzhen area quickly threw together substandard factory buildings to accommodate the wave of new investment. As more and more factories from Hong Kong and, later, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea relocated to the SEZ, the local supply of labour became inadequate. By the end of the 1980s, local Shenzhen people who had been working in these labour-intensive factories were earning enough from renting out buildings and providing services to investors that they no longer wanted to toil under the dreadful conditions that were prevalent at that time. Hence a massive number of young people from poor villages in inland provinces, desperate to escape rural poverty, were allowed to come to Shenzhen to fill the labour shortage.³ In the belief that young women were more docile, most of the factories, including Zhili, preferred to hire women under the age of twenty-three or twenty-four rather than young men.

The Workers' Private Letters

Zhili was housed in a 'three-in-one factory building' (三合一厂房) that included workshops, storage areas, and a dormitory. Although this kind of arrangement had already been banned as a fire hazard, the company had a record of violating safety regulations and defying restrictions through bribing local officials. Raw materials were piled up on staircases, iron rods were installed on windows, and safety exits were blocked and locked to prevent theft. When the fire broke out on 19 November 1993, the workers were trapped in the inferno. Eighty-seven perished. Many of those who were lucky enough to survive were severely burned, scarred for life, and sent back to their home villages.

Living conditions in such a factory were extremely basic. During a tour of similar factories in the toy industry that I undertook in the mid-1990s, I recall being ushered through a converted warehouse filled with rows and rows of bunkbeds for more than 100 workers, with the floor strewn with garbage.

Soon after the Zhili fire, a Chinese industrial relations researcher visited the site and retrieved a few hundred personal letters from the remains of the dormitory. Most of the letters had been written by the friends and relatives of the Zhili victims, many of whom were themselves migrant workers in Shenzhen or other parts of China. Almost all the letters were penned by female workers. The researcher kindly passed on to me seventy-seven letters, which form the basis of this essay. Through these letters, the workers exchanged information on factory conditions and revealed their inner fears and aspirations. The descriptions of their work situations, living conditions, health, and feelings towards the factories were candid and intimate.⁴

Physical Survival and Hunger

What issues were the most important and urgent to the workers? Questions and comments about wages and money appeared most frequently in the letters (107 times), with some writers complaining that wages were too low to allow them to send any money home or even to eat properly.

Fifteen entries in the letters alluded to whether there was enough food. For instance, one worker asked her correspondent: 'In your factory do you have two meals or three meals? I hope you're not too frugal. If you're hungry, go buy something to eat.' Similarly, another worker wrote: 'Little sister, you should go to see the doctor. Don't take money too seriously. To have a body in good health is to have everything. Don't be stingy. Make sure you eat both breakfast and dinner.' The concern was quantity, not whether the food was nutritious or tasted good, which did not warrant even one entry in the letters. The letters allude to the fact that some workers skipped meals to save money, that some factories did not provide enough food in their messrooms, and also that, back home in the countryside, they sometimes experienced hunger. A decade later, when I visited factories during lunch breaks in the early 2000s, the situation was quite different. Generally, workers could help themselves to as many bowls of rice as they wanted, and the biggest complaints were about quality and taste, a lack of meat, and repetitive dishes.

A letter-writer advised her friend that 'to have good health is to have everything'. It was not just the food that took a toll on workers' physical and mental health. The writers mentioned extremely long working hours, repetitive tasks, a poor environment, abusive treatment, toxic air, and industrial injuries. Seventeen entries in the letters discussed work-related

ailments; one entry complained of enervating weight loss, and eight others noted exhaustion, lack of sleep, and a death from poisoning related to paint, with the body of the deceased quietly sent back to her home village. The most frequent ailments were headaches, fevers, and leg pain. That was a time when occupational health and safety standards and knowledge about them were extremely low. In 1994, some 5,000 factories in Shenzhen were classed as hazardous according to occupational health and safety standards; 4,000 of these were foreign-owned factories employing approximately 250,000 workers. Despite the complaints of feeling unwell, only in one letter did a worker mention that she had taken a few days off. The others appear to have remained at work even when they were suffering—either too poor to afford any time off or, as I discovered in my fieldwork, afraid of the fines that some factories imposed on anyone taking sick leave.

Low Wages and Very Long Working Hours

To gain a full grasp of the anxiety felt by these workers, it is necessary to compare their wages with the legal minimum wage in Shenzhen, which at that time was 280 yuan a month for a forty-four-hour week. Back then, the legal minimum wage was set at the level of subsistence. Twenty-three letters provided the specific amount the writer earned. Of these, only four met the level of Shenzhen's legal minimum wage, and the rest earned less than that. Three wrote that their factory withheld a portion of their monthly wage and eleven wrote that they faced serious problems getting paid. The pay was so sporadic that workers were apt to ask each other in their correspondence whether they had yet been paid. With the usual response being 'not yet', it seems the norm was not getting paid on time.

In addition, twenty-seven workers wrote that they received irregular payments, had wages withheld, were paid as low as sixty yuan for the month, or were not paid at all. Of all the workers who mentioned wages without providing the exact amount in their letters, forty-six had serious problems in this regard. Many who had come to Shenzhen had spent all their families could afford to make the long journey and were desperate to find a job on arrival. Pressed by these hard circumstances, they had started work without knowing when and how much they would be paid.

In reality, the wage rates were even lower than they might seem at first sight. The minimum legal wage per month was set for an eight-hour workday. But the normal workday for these workers was eleven to twelve

hours. Fresh from the impoverished countryside, where wage labour was uncommon and the daily work rhythm was flexible, and not knowing that there were legal maximum working hours or minimum pay, the workers had little idea that they were being cheated. They did not complain of the long working hours in their letters, only of being tired. Their fear was not so much that they would be required to work until they were dead tired, but rather that there would not be enough working hours to allow them to feed themselves and send some money home to their families. This would defeat their main purpose for leaving home. Several wrote about very long working hours at their factory being a positive inducement to work there. As the young woman quoted in the epigraph of this essay wrote: 'I am now working in another factory. It's better than the Japanese umbrella factory. It's twelve hours work a day. If my factory needs people, I'll let you know.'

Physical Entrapment

The second-largest number of letter entries related to workers asking each other about the conditions and wages in other factories in the hope they could escape their present situation and join their relatives or friends there. The letters contained a lot of comments comparing jobs, strategies to change jobs, and the difficulty of quitting one's current factory.

They had difficulty quitting because of the constraints imposed on them by China's household registration system (戶口; *hukou*). Workers from the countryside were not only denied urban registration in the city where they worked; if they were without a job, they were also considered an illegal 'migrant' in much the same vein as an international illegal migrant is regarded today. At the time of the Zhili fire, a migrant worker picked up by police without a temporary work permit was usually placed in a jail-like detention centre. Unless a friend or relative came to pay bail of several hundred yuan, the worker would be sent back to the countryside. As the police found that they could make easy money by arresting illegal migrants, the number of arrests increased with time. This stringent control of migrant workers was relaxed only in 2003 after the Sun Zhigang incident, in which a migrant university graduate died in police detention (see Froissart's essay in the present volume). After a massive public outcry, the authority of the police to detain migrant workers was transferred to the Civic Affairs Bureau, which could no longer incarcerate migrants.

Making matters worse for migrant workers, it was a common practice for employers to hold on to the identification cards of employees; without these, the worker would not dare even to go out the factory gate. On top of that, employers normally demanded that workers pay a bond at the time of recruitment or withheld their wages for the first two months, so that if the worker ran away, she would lose a substantial sum. In reality, this first generation of migrant workers were bonded labourers—a situation that continued for the next decade and more. At some of the factories where I conducted interviews in the early 2000s, the workers' most serious grievance was that they could not afford to forfeit the bond and wages if they resigned.

Isolation

Thirty entries expressed loneliness and feelings of isolation or misery, of sorely missing friends and relatives, of crying and yearning for letters and photos from loved ones. This period pre-dated mobile phones and internet cafes, and it was not easy to access a public phone at the workplace. Since they worked such long hours, the window to lock in a time to talk on the phone was limited, and at the other end there often was only one phone in an entire village, usually at the production team or the production brigade office. In such circumstances, the only practical means of communication was by letter, but the mail service was slow and unreliable. The anxiety of waiting for a letter was sometimes palpable, as in the case of a worker who wrote: 'I sent you a letter a few days ago. Have you got it? I look forward to your letter every day but it never comes. I think of you very much.' Similar feelings can be found in another letter that a worker wrote after a sister or friend had just arrived in Shenzhen:

Though we are so near, we can only see each other in our letters.
Little sister, can you please send me a photo. I sent my photo to your home. Did you get it? I'll close off here. See you in a letter next time.

The Zhili Fire's Influence on the Labour Movement

Even though the Zhili tragedy was reported in Beijing, the families of the victims had difficulty claiming compensation for their loss. The local government took a hands-off attitude. Nor did the Zhili fire have an

impact on China's labour laws, unlike the New York Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. The main impact of the tragedy with regard to legislation was stronger enforcement of the ban on three-in-one factory buildings; from then on, shopfloors, storage warehouses, and workers' dormitories had to be self-contained in separate buildings.

At the international level, the fire attracted the attention of newspapers and foreign trade unions, which began to pay closer attention to working conditions in China's growing export sector. In particular, the fire led Hong Kong labour NGOs to become more involved with the plight of Chinese migrant workers in the neighbouring Shenzhen region. Hong Kong labour NGOs continued to publicise the case in Hong Kong and internationally, and launched a campaign calling on the Zhili factory's Hong Kong owner to be held responsible for compensating the Zhili victims. They connected the Zhili fire with the Kaida Toy Factory fire in Thailand, which on 10 May 1993 claimed the lives of 188 workers, and used these cases as graphic illustrations of the serious violations of labour rights in the global production chain. The Hong Kong Toy Coalition was created to put pressure on the multinational toy corporations to accept their responsibility for the welfare of the workers who produced their merchandise.⁵ Starting with the Zhili fire, Hong Kong labour NGOs became deeply involved in the international corporate social responsibility movement and in monitoring the violation of labour rights in China. Ever since, these organisations have played an important role as a bridge between Chinese labourers in Guangdong Province and the international labour movement.⁶