

then, that China, a one-party state with rampant corruption, a party-controlled judicial system, and tight controls on journalists, has been a well-spring of environmental disasters and labor abuses. Yet even in China, the tide continues to turn.

The Race Moves On

The race to the bottom, the race to the top, and the unwitting conspiracy between social and market forces were all at work in eastern China in 2008. Even though China's record on a variety of civil and political liberties leaves much to be desired, as China has become wealthier its citizens have found a variety of ways to make their views known. Ching Kwan Lee writes that though the traditional view of the Chinese worker is as a "diabolically exploited, haplessly diligent, mindlessly docile, nondescript and disposable human being,"⁴⁹ the truth is that even by official Chinese government count there are now thousands of workplace protests each year by newly empowered workers demanding fair-pay practices and better working conditions.⁵⁰ A new Chinese labor law, in effect as of January 1, 2008, was responsive to many of the workers' demands, and represents a significant expansion of employee rights and protection in China.⁵¹

Chinese citizens are also increasingly making their voices heard on issues of environmental protection. The Chinese government itself has warned that environmental degradation is a potential source of social instability, and has released a report pointing to the "alarming" increase in environmental activism in both cities and rural areas.⁵²

Chinese authorities have responded with a variety of laws strengthening protection for the environment.⁵³ Indeed, one industry expert argued that the stringency of the new environmental regulations would make it impossible to construct a traditional knitting and dyeing mill in southern China,⁵⁴ which is just as well, according to the newly wealthy surrounding communities, which prefer clean waterways to factory work. At the same time, pressures from the global community and especially from western companies for China to clean up both labor and environmental problems continue.⁵⁵

The market forces were pushing in the same directions as the activists. Wealthier workers are increasingly likely to eschew garment factory work, and factories have responded by trying to woo workers with higher salaries and better perks, ranging from roller rinks to swimming pools. A worker in a South China shoe factory explained the transition simply: “Now it’s not the factories choosing me. It’s me choosing the factory.”⁵⁶ And researchers continue to confirm the commonsense proposition that better working conditions are a market-led result of higher-skill industrialization.⁵⁷ Yet markets alone do not generate protections for workers or for the environment. Instead, as Peter Dougherty argues, it is often the protections demanded by the activists that facilitate the development of the markets.⁵⁸



Labor costs in coastal China are increasing rapidly, and garment workers in this region now make approximately triple the wage as in lower-cost producers such as Pakistan and Vietnam, as well as significantly more than the workers in the rural areas of China.⁵⁹ In 2008, stories abounded of firms moving apparel sourcing to less expensive areas of China and to other countries. All in all, the higher market wages, as well as the cost of complying with greater environmental and worker protections, have pushed light manufacturing costs up by 20 to 40 percent in recent years.⁶⁰ Garment factories in eastern China are shrinking, closing, and moving on to the next stops in the race—the inland areas of China as well as Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Pakistan.

The garment workers in Shanghai and south China may no longer stitch T-shirts, but there will be plenty to do. Chinese production of machinery, electronics, automobiles, and other high-end goods is growing, and the former seamstresses will take their new confidence and their new wardrobes to jobs at Coca Cola, General Motors, and Starbucks—or perhaps to Lenovo, which in 2005 purchased the personal computer business from IBM.

Other garment workers will take their savings back to the rural areas, where economic growth is now accelerating. The factory wages brought home are building houses, sending siblings to school, and starting businesses. In 2008, after a decade in Shanghai garment factories, He Yuan Zhi

returned with her savings to Jianxi province.

A few years ago, I was given a coffee-table book of photos taken in Shanghai before the Communist revolution of 1949.⁶¹ One section of the photo book is titled “Cotton Thieves,” and the desperation, the fear, the abject poverty of the Shanghai mill workers nearly leapt from the pages. In one photo, children chase after a horse-drawn cart that was bringing raw cotton from the port into the mill. The children were hoping a fluff or two of cotton would fall from the cart. If they could grab a fluff, then perhaps they could spin a few inches of yarn themselves, to sell or to mend with; or perhaps the fluff could help to pad a jacket for the winter. In other photos, the mill workers themselves tried to tuck small fluffs into their clothing. The photographs show the bloody results for those who were caught.

We can try to imagine the desperation that would lead a mother to risk a bloody arrest for a small tuft of raw cotton, but we cannot, and neither can the garment workers in Shanghai today.

I thought of these photographs on a 2007 visit to the Number 8 spinning factory not far from downtown Shanghai. Using typical Communist flair, the Chinese government gave companies numbers, not names; the Number 1 cotton yarn factory, the Number 2 factory, and so forth, all the way up to number 40. Today, just six of these remain open, the rest razed and remodeled to make way for the new Shanghai as the race to the bottom moves on. The cotton mill I was visiting in 2007 was no longer a mill; it had been transformed into a complex of contemporary art galleries. Yet the bones of the mill were still in place, and plaques informed visitors that they were entering “the cotton receiving room” or “the spinning room.” The complex contained perhaps a dozen buildings.

Of course, if the walls could talk they would tell of the workers killed in the Communist Revolution, and the managers who committed suicide during the Cultural Revolution. They would tell of the cotton thieves in the photo book and the mail slots where unwanted babies were dropped. They would tell of the hope of the reform era, when China began to sell cotton T-shirts to America. They would tell of the activists who fought for bathroom breaks or fire exits or overtime pay. They would tell of the race that stopped here for just a moment in time.

I sat near the old spinning room, which was now a chic cafe’ for the art

gallery visitors. The waiter had a nose ring and streaked hair, and spoke perfect English. The “cotton thieves” photos had been taken near here just 60 years before, but it could have been a different universe. The race to the bottom had moved on, and in the cotton spinning room was not a sweatshop worker but a chef. She told me that she had come from the countryside to attend cooking school. Her mother had worked in a garment factory, which had paid for the tuition, but the garment factory had recently closed, and her mother was now comfortable in retirement. I asked the young woman whether she could sew. “No,” she laughed. “But I can make tiramisu.”